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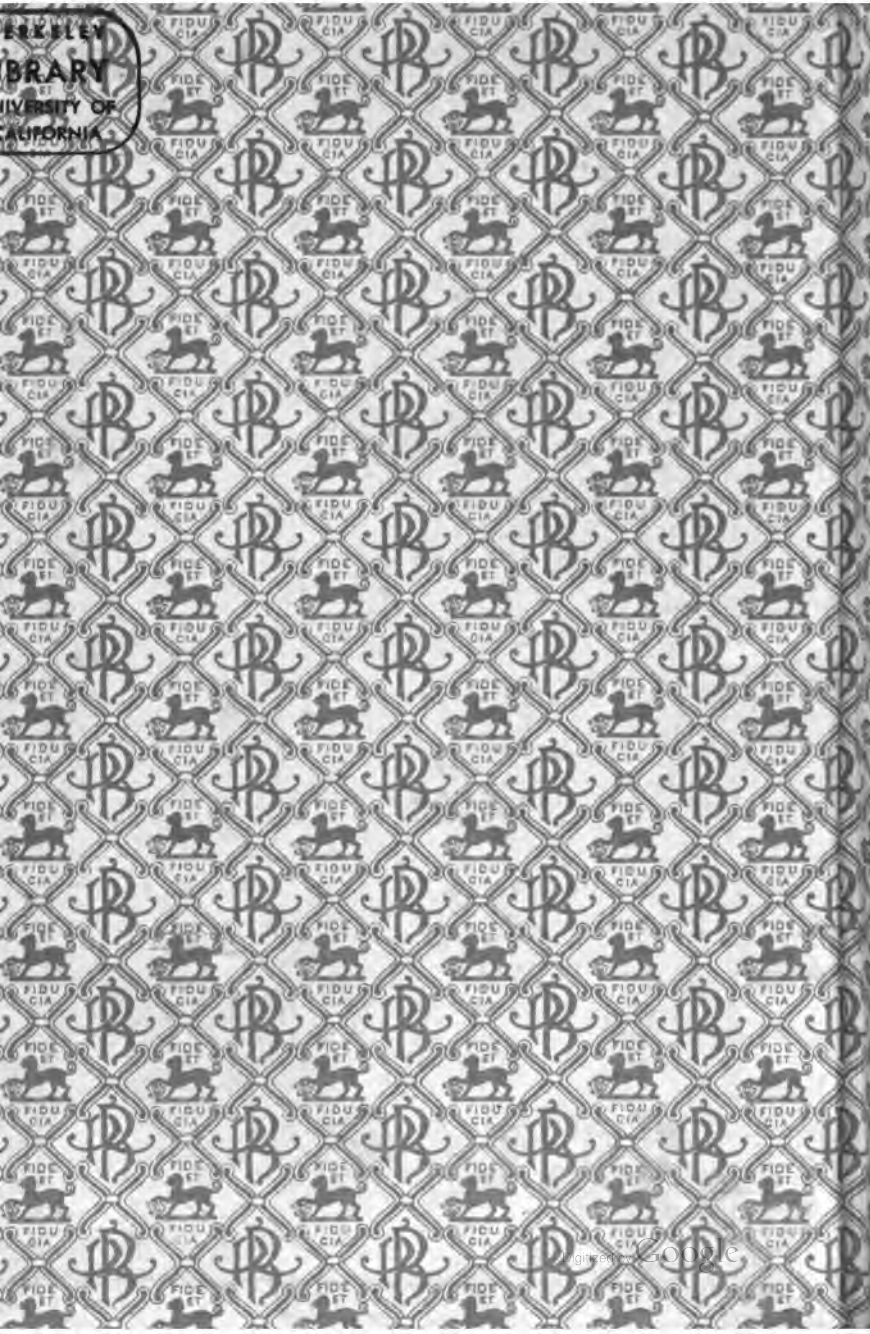
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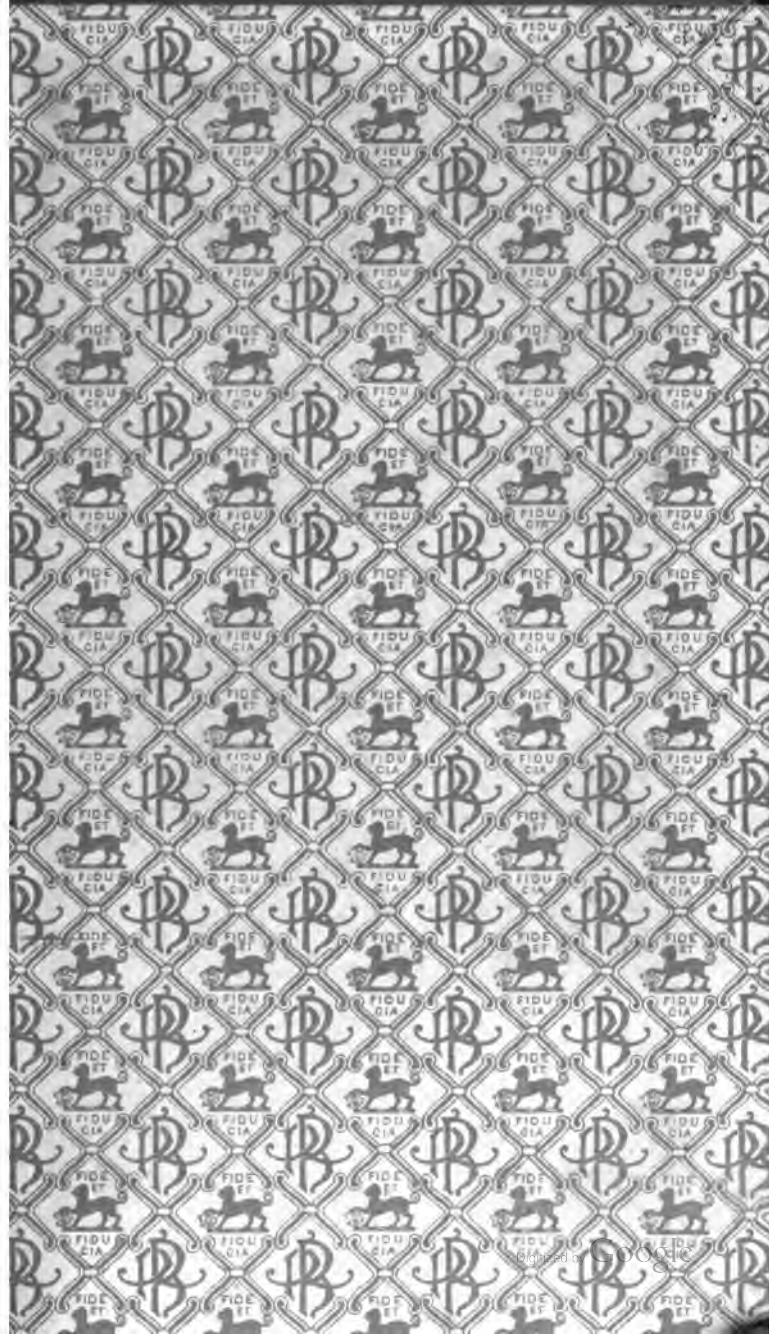
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# THE MAID OF HONOUR

**VOL. III.**



# THE MAID OF HONOUR

*A Tale of the Dark Days of France*

BY

THE HON. LEWIS WINGFIELD

AUTHOR OF

"LADY GRIZEL," "THE LORDS OF STROGUE," "ABIGEL ROWE"  
ETC.



*IN THREE VOLUMES*

VOL. III.

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TO  
WILLIAM HENRY WELDON.

A TRIBUTE  
OF OLD FRIENDSHIP.





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# THE MAID OF HONOUR.

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## CHAPTER XX.

### DIPLOMACY.

IT was a matter of imperative necessity to beat down at once the protecting barriers within which the victim had ensconced herself, and here was the first difficulty to be conquered. It was evident that Gabrielle's written ultimatum called for a reply. At the suggestion, Clovis fairly winced. Was he to grovel in the mud, and accept her humiliating terms? Never! And in writing, too! He would

rather cut off his hand. What did Providence mean by creating marquises unfurnished with necessary adjuncts? Are not fowls provided with plumes and polar bears with fur? Why for years had the purse yawned for him, and then suddenly shut itself up? Not the purse exactly, for there existed that hateful allowance, which he would never, never soil his fingers with; but the marital authority and position which go with unstinted means! They had both shrivelled away, and the Marquis de Gange smarted as if he had been tarred and feathered. What would people say when the last whimsey of the chatelaine leaked out? She posed as a martyr, but took good care to protect herself against martyrdom. And what was the awful grievance? That the exigencies of his scientific studies (of which she was

too ignorant and stupid to know aught) required the professional assistance of a diplomaed disciple of the prophet, and that the adept selected by the prophet chanced to be a woman! Was ever anything so low and paltry as this ridiculous assumption of jealousy? Had he, Clovis, ever made love to Mademoiselle Brunelle? Never. Delighting in like pursuits, they were dear and trusted friends after the manner of male friendship, and none but a base nature could take umbrage at such an alliance.

Judging from her absurd precautions of changed locks and newly-opened doors, the martyr seemed to consider herself in peril—evidently meant the country to suppose so. Her husband was an ogre—a roaring Fee-fo-fum—would by and by serve up her tender limbs on toast, with



rich and luscious gravy. The abbé might argue till he was black in the face, but if Mistress Gabrielle could be haughty, so could he. He declined to answer the letter.

“Dear me! a scandal!” objected the abbé in distress, “an inevitable scandal! Might his attached and ever-devoted brother go forth and play the ambassador?”

Pharamond might do what he deemed right, on the clear understanding that the head of the house would not consent to anything that should hold him up to ridicule.

Armed thus with maimed powers, Pharamond went on his mission. He had almost traversed the length of the long saloon, ere Gabrielle, looking up from her embroidery, beheld the intruder. The blood rushed to her face, then slowly

ebbed. They would not accept her terms, then, but would force their presence on her?

Bidding the girl and boy who were romping on the floor, to retire to their school-room, she laid her work upon the table, and with crossed hands waited.

“Madame must try and pardon this intrusion,” began the abbé, meekly, “because it could not be avoided. I am here to speak, for my brother would not write, and it is rude not to answer a letter. Will madame be so courteous as to hear me out?”

Gabrielle, after a moment's reflection, pointed to a seat, but Pharamond shook his head.

“Madame does not accept me as a friend,” he observed, drily, “so I have no desire to stay a moment more than I'm obliged.”

“ A friend ? Who has never done me anything but harm ! ”

“ Are we to discuss all that again ? ” he replied. “ You have yourself admitted, more than once, that you owed much to me, and yet you compelled me by your own conduct reluctantly to withdraw what I had given.”

“ You do well to remind me ! ” returned Gabrielle, swelling with contempt. “ Your terms of peace were that your brother’s wife was to become your mistress ! You are right to stand. Say what you have to say, and quickly.”

“ I have, in the first place, to point out to Madame la Marquise the result of her present course of action. Does a wife, think you, gain in the world’s esteem by constantly insulting her husband ? ”

“ I have never insulted my husband.”

“Not by making a fool of him before all his class—by treating him like an ill-bred child, that may not be trusted? By driving him from beneath the roof which should be his?”

“What?” ejaculated Gabrielle, amazed.

“That is what you have done, and, believe me, the world will be against you, however plausible a tale you may invent.”

“Is he going away?” faltered the marquise, beginning to see the position in another light.

“Is it probable that so proud a man would stay to be made the laughing-stock of all Touraine? Of course not. Beggary were better than such deep disgrace as that. His name is yours, and yet to your own shame you wilfully drag it in the mire. We are all going away, so you will

have your chateau to yourself, and when we arrive in Paris it is you who will be the laughing-stock."

"Going away! How will you all live?" asked the marquise, pondering.

"Expelled from the home that should have been our brother's, the chevalier and I will return to Montpellier. The marquis will retreat to Spa, and take service with the mesmerists. He will be happy there in congenial society, for though very poor, he will be freed from dread of insult."

Gabrielle was bewildered. She was being held up to herself in the most natural manner possible, as a tyrant, an insulter of the poor, in whom dwelt neither justice nor compassion. It was not true, she knew that right well; but perhaps without intent, she had been harsh. Yet

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no—with a remembrance of the crowning outrage of that woman's return, came renewed courage.

The abbé concluded he had gained a point and followed it swiftly with another thrust.

“Madame will excuse me, if I remark that she is given to hallucinations, such as are common in hysterical subjects. She suffers from delusions, invents charges against her sorely-stricken husband, which at expense of his private feelings must be rebutted. His position having been rendered untenable by his wealthy wife, he is compelled to leave her house, and in doing so refrains from the one punishment which lies within easy reach. If he chose, he could remove his children, but he will not, for he has learned with pain that one of madame's chief delusions is that she

has herself been divided from her offspring. That he may not be placed in the wrong, by any more such idle fancies, he consents to sacrifice himself, and will leave them with madame *for the present*. I think I have followed all my instructions, and with madame's permission will retire."

The abbé who had spoken with dispassionate calm, made a low reverence, and without looking at the lady moved slowly down the saloon. Would she call him back? No. Better to leave her to chew the cud of bitter and perplexing thought. The arrow was planted, and now would fester. Toinon would surely appear with another letter in the evening. His fingers were on the door handle when a low, sad voice called, "Abbé!"

Did he hear aright? He turned with

manifest reluctance. "Madame deigned to speak?"

"Yes. Come back, I pray you."

With a slight but eloquent shoulder shrug of deprecation, the cunning churchman moved up the saloon again, very slowly, as if under protest.

"Madame would wish to know," he asked, "how soon she will be quit of us? Alas! we must crave indulgence, for my brother's scientific instruments will take long to pack. They are brittle and expensive articles which, under the new conditions, he could never afford to replace."

The marquise was visibly troubled, and the abbé had some ado to keep his countenance. The man was a human chameleon, and poor Gabrielle had not the weapons wherewith to smite such animals. His manner was so staid and stern, yet



meek withal, that she could scarce believe that it was over this same passionless face that she had seen pass and fade dissolving views of such deep-dyed iniquity. Was this the satyr who had inflicted scorching kisses; who had by turns cajoled and brutally threatened her—the man of whom she had grown to be mortally afraid? He had just held up for contemplation a portrait of herself, which, though hideously distorted, was like. But was it? It was, and yet it was not. He had made her out a monster.

So they were going away and would leave her in peace with the children? How unexpected a *dénouement*. It never entered the simple head of Gabrielle to suspect that the man was lying. Proud as she was herself, she could understand and appreciate, and even applaud the feeling

which preferred independent poverty to gilded bondage. And she had meant so well in what she had done ! But put as it had just been, it did seem wrong to make a husband—even a bad one—so dependent. A man dependent on a woman is always a subject for ridicule. Woman governed by her feelings is so easily misled !

Ah me ! Permit me to moralize for just a minute. Why is it that the more angelic we are—the more ready to moult our earthy plumage—we should be the less fit to combat those of earth ? The more guileless and innocent a woman is—quite fit to soar aloft with newly-sprouted wings—the more abjectly pitiable a victim. Perhaps it means that earth should be left to the earthy, and that angels have no business here at all.

The marquise, while arranging bolts

and barriers was quite under the impression that she was a martyr, that a menacing sword was dangling overhead which would fall and pierce her skull, and now she was told—and there seemed some truth in it—that she had been carried away by imagination. According to the abbé she stood convicted of hysteria! If their method of showing displeasure took the form of retreat with bag and baggage, leaving her the solitary mistress of the field, how could she be in danger? They would leave presently, declaring that the heiress had flung her money in their faces in so vulgar a fashion that self-respect compelled departure. Draped in the picturesque dignity of rags, they, not she, would wear the auriole of martyrdom—a consideration as new as disconcerting. It was satisfactory to find that Clovis, bad as she

knew him to be, could be so proud. There must be much latent good in a selfish man who, to shield his manhood from smirching, will cheerfully abandon flesh-pots. His wife had calculated (and justly, too) that though he might whine and grumble, he would accept any conditions which did not withdraw the comforts which made life worth living. His wife fully intended that he should have ample means to play ducks and drakes with, but, surrounded as he was by a bad *entourage*, he must not be permitted to be master. And, lo and behold, he snapped his fingers at the money, and elected to wear the rags!

Rapidly reviewing the situation, Gabrielle's heart warmed in a tepid manner to the man whom she had wrongly read. She approved the attitude he had assumed, but could not allow him to retain it.

The abbé had rightly appraised the exceeding generosity of her nature and had played on it. When she called him back he was pleased to mark how clouded was her brow, how shaken was her fixed resolve.

"Clovis has judged me harshly," she observed. "I never wished to drive him from his home."

Things were going well. The outraged one was apologizing for her conduct.

"Que voulez-vous!" replied the abbé with a shrug. "He has my full approval. It is not well to place an honourable man in a false position."

"Nor an honourable woman either," aptly retorted the marquise.

"That brings us to the burning question," said the abbé, drawing a step nearer, in his earnestness. "The fault, if fault it

was, was mine, not Clovis's, and I am prepared to bear the blame of my own actions. A little more blame or less," he added, lightly, "cannot make much difference, since I know you consider me a demon. That is all dead and buried—blown away and done with." By a graceful gesture the churchman blew away the past. "It was I who brought back Mademoiselle Brunelle for prudential reasons, which I admit humbly now were unjustifiable. I thought your objection to the lady was founded on her interference in the nursery and nothing more, and, as you know, she quite understands that in future she has no place there. If your memory serves you, you will remember my pointing out once that a man like Clovis requires to be led by a woman. You could not or would not lead him—

that is your affair ; and I felt convinced that we were fortunate in his having a leader whose relations with him were platonic. What if, deprived of her, he had pitched on an affinity of exactly the opposite stamp ? ”

This was true also. Gabrielle felt that it was.

“ As it is by your line of action you lead the world to suppose that you deem them guilty, and you know as well as I do that although she once talked nonsense in bravado, they are innocent. You drive us from the house and we go. Need I remark that mademoiselle goes with us ? Thus you accentuate the suggestion of impropriety which you are aware does not exist, instead of showing by your behaviour that you are satisfied of the innocence of both.”

“Do you think to persuade me,” asked the marquise, with sad wonder, in which was a tinge of bitterness, “to accept the woman’s presence? The son of the Church calls for too lavish a display of Christian charity.”

“I call on you for nothing,” returned the abbé, meekly, “since in a week we shall be gone. The scandal of disruption will lie with you ; we are not responsible.”

So the man persisted in proving her to be in the wrong !

“I do not desire that you should go away, and I will admit that I have been precipitate. What does Clovis want? I am ready to do all I can to meet his views, but he must not suppose that I will accept that woman.”

The marquise’s barriers were tottering



Even the abbé had not expected that she would show such feebleness of purpose. His point of refraining to strike at her through her offspring, by removing them, was cleverly imagined, and had told. Would it be prudent to administer another stroke now, to attempt by a vigorous charge to carry the citadel at once, or would it be wiser to wait? It would not do to present the appearance of taking too much upon himself. Clovis must be forced to come forward and play his part. The ground was well prepared. The wife felt compunctious visitings, and so the husband might say his say without loss of dignity. The abbé resolved, therefore, that it was time for him to retire into shadow. So he echoed quietly, "What does he want? Nothing, since as you yourself wrote, 'all is over.' When you

first propounded the notion to me, I knew he would not forgive that testament."

So that was at the bottom of it all. Who could have guessed that a dreamy man, wrapped in scientific mists, should so hotly resent an infringement of marital authority? She appeared to have wandered unwittingly so far into the thicket of error, that it seemed vain to grope after the right; and yet, as she repeated to herself again and again, she had meant so extremely well!

The presentiment was proved to be idle wind, since they were all ready to go without a struggle. Had not M. Galland declared it to be due to morbid fancy? The scandal of an open separation must be avoided for the children's sake. What answer could she make to Victor when, grown to manhood, he asked why his

father was a beggar? The proposed exodus must be stopped at all hazards. What if the white-robed marquise were to dabble the hem of her skirt in the mire of deception for a little, or, to put it more nicely, make use of diplomatic arts? Supposing that she were to allow herself to be persuaded into cancelling the will, had she not arranged for the contingency? The unlucky will had somehow produced the worst of effects upon the marquis, and there could be no possibility of peace till that question was set at rest. The idea of so deceiving her husband, brought a guilty tingle to her cheek, but there seemed no other way to cut the knot. Infatuated as he was with the woman who had behaved so abominably, and had made her life so wretched, she would never really consent to leave the future of the darlings in his

hands; but might she not pretend to do so? A signature with a cross appended would speak for itself. For the sake of future harmony, it might be judicious to appear to give way. Though it is naughty to do wrong, we all know that the naughtiness becomes a virtue when it is clear that it will result in good. Raising her deep blue eyes to meet the abbé's, she remarked that she would consider all that he had said, and let him know her decision later.

Pharamond bowed. "Decision—on what point?" he inquired.

"Oblige me," replied the marquise, "by requesting M. le Marquis to leave things as they are until he hears again from me."

The interview had been most satisfactory, and Pharamond's face beamed as he went down the staircase. What an admir-

able inspiration that had been about their enforced departure, with bag and baggage—and with Aglaé! And how easily the poor soul had tumbled into the specious snare. And then he laughed aloud at the fancied picture of Clovis in his poverty. That he of all men should sacrifice his comforts! Before his marriage with the heiress, he had been used to a measure of it, but since he had lain on roses, their perfume had become a necessity. Moreover, his own heavily-cumbered estates were in one of the most turbulent provinces, where landlords might whistle for their rents. Were he in sober earnest to resign his position of prince consort, black bread and a garret would be his fate. To think that Gabrielle should be so hoodwinked! What was she going to consider? and how long would she be about it?

As Clovis listened to his brother's report, he rubbed his nose in perplexity, glancing askance at Aglaé, who nodded her head in approval.

“She will come to her senses, and all will be well,” declared that lady. “She will know that the vulgar *intriguante* is a poor, harmless, humble friend of milord's, who only asks for the opportunity to forgive. Va! I bear no malice to jealous mad women. She hunted me away with ignominy, yet did I not clasp her to me afterwards? It was for monsieur's sake, for whom he knows I would spill my blood, I forced myself to do so. What is she to me? Except for your sake, nothing!”

Clovis bit his nails to the quick as he walked about the room. That she had changed her mind was well, but would she not insist upon some conditions which he

could not, as a man, accept ? He was not going to kneel in the dust. They must all make up their minds to that. He was ready to meet her half-way if she would promise to behave better in the future, but as to any more school-boy treatment, he would submit to nothing of the kind.

It was pitiable to see the weak, unstable man fluttering in borrowed plumes, blown out with a proud conviction in his heroic strength of character.

“Monsieur !” cried Aglaé, in her rolling tones of thunder, “oblige me by sitting down. Since I was so disgraced here, my nerves are not what they were. Clovis, I was going to say—” she added, with a great roar, clapping her large hands together in guileless glee—“Monsieur le Marquis and I,” she went on needlessly to explain to the abbé, “are such *bons cama-*

*rades* that if I was not conscious of lowly descent, and in terror of the jealous mad woman, I should almost think I was his sister! But, oh! mon Dieu, what rashness! If the servants were to hear me call him Clovis, and report the awful delinquency to the pale nun upstairs, what shrieks and screams! When saints condescend to human frailties, they are very much like other mortals."

"Always call me Clovis. I insist on it," observed, with benign authority, the bird in borrowed plumes.

Aglaé, with one of those impulsive movements, which in so massive a woman were charming, because unexpected, jumped up and kissed the marquis's hand, and pressed it to her bosom. "Clovis. To me always Clovis—when we are alone with the abbé," she mur-



mured, gratefully, " but not in public—for your sake. Since you are so kind—so kind—cannot I put up with annoyance from the nun ? So far as I am concerned, accept all, and any of her conditions. If she drives me forth again, I can take up my residence at Blois, which is not so very far, and you will sometimes come and see me."

Aglaé was vastly improved. With delighted admiration Clovis had, since her return, become assured of it. Her spirits were more airy, her humour more refined ; and she fairly bubbled over with good nature, and she never made remarks now that were unpleasantly pithy. What an advantage large women have over small ones ! It is given to the small to be querulous and vixenish. The large and stout ones are conspicuous for indulgent charity, You rarely find them

speaking ill of their neighbours. Clovis was quite convinced that Aglaé was a dusky pearl, and blamed himself severely for mistrusting her at the time of the attempted suicide.

Gabrielle was not long in coming to a decision. Having been admittedly precipitate, and having looked at things from their worst point of view, it was her place to show generosity. What could she lose by falling in with the wishes of the men, and making a new will to please them, which, in the event of her death, would be no better than waste-paper? Since Clovis could show a proper pride, such as became his rank, it would not be well to torment him. It had been a noble trait that in the same breath, he should have proposed to retire from the scene, and yet not distress her about the children. Sup-

posing he had gone, along with Aglaé, and had taken the dear ones with him? Legally, she would have had no remedy. It never should be said that he could be more generous than she. The baleful woman whose evil spells had wrecked her content must go, of course; but she should be allowed to take her time, and not be expelled violently, as before. Ostensibly, she had come on a visit. Let her remain for a week or two longer, and quietly withdraw. No harm would be done. No scandal would arise. The acute incident would be closed, giving way to a prospect of tranquillity.

His wife sent a short note to the marquis, begging his attendance in the boudoir. He made a wry face, for it was terribly like a schoolboy's summons to receive a flogging.

But Aglaé, the large-hearted, placed her brown hands upon his shoulders and shook him amicably. "You are indeed a child, my Clovis, and deserve the flogging!" she said, cheerily. "Fi donc! A gentleman obeys a lady's bidding. Would you have her come down here and sing peccavi before me, whom she detests? Infant! go to her and make it up, and if she proposes stipulations about me, be sure to accede to them all."

Clovis obeyed with a bad grace, and entered his wife's boudoir with the sorry air of a malefactor who pleads guilty—a condition that was not improved by the dignified courtesy of his reception. With a serene smile, Gabrielle bade him sit by her side.

"We seem doomed to have misunderstandings," she sighed; "and I am fain

to confess that the blame is equally divided. I unwittingly offended you on a money question. I often wish that there was no such thing as money."

The exordium was promising, and Clovis plucked up his spirits. With a polite bow he remained silent.

"What would you have me do?" she asked.

"Release me from the possible prospect of being held up to ridicule by my children."

"It shall be done—upon conditions."

Ah! There were to be conditions then? The anger of the marquis rose. His face assumed so sullen an expression that Gabrielle felt less compunction as to her pious fraud. Such men as her husband and his brother were not fit to have the custody of children; as to that she

had no doubt. When she proceeded to explain that he might send for a notary, and she would sign another will on condition that a certain person undertook to withdraw from the circle, Clovis could scarce contain his passion..

When the maréchal's solicitors had forced him to obedience it was bad enough—but now—to receive peremptory orders from his wife! He was not such a ninny as to be taken in by the little sop. That Aglaé was to be allowed to stay on for a week or two just to keep up appearances made no difference. He had chosen to engage a female secretary and helper concerning whose relations with himself there could be no suspicion in any healthy mind, and he was to be deprived of her assistance in his work through a morbid and unworthy suspicion.

"What if I refuse?" he said, sulkily.  
"You will play the martyr, I suppose?"

"I will place the matter before the Seigneurie and magistrates of Blois," Gabrielle quietly replied. "The line they counsel I will take."

The wrath of the marquis boiled over. His hands shook, and his fingers twitched as though he would like to strike her.

"You will do that?" he muttered, harshly. "You will wash our linen in public to make me a fool before the province? You will deliberately create a public *esclandre* at so dangerous a moment?"

"Alas!" returned his wife, mournfully, "the scandal is made by you. All I ask is to be treated with respect. Rid me for ever of her who has been the shadow

across our path, and I will carry out your wishes. Refuse, and I will seek the protection of the Seigneurie, who shall arbitrate between us."

"I will return you a written answer," Clovis said, abruptly rising and making for the door. He could not and would not be ordered thus to part with Aglaé; and yet he was sorely anxious for the cancelling of the hateful document. He was not capable of steering his bark alone among rocks and shallows, but must seek counsel from the others. They were awaiting him, and in a white heat of vexation he poured out to them his woes.

Mademoiselle Brunelle laughed merrily, directing sly looks of intelligence at the abbé, who frowned over his brother's shoulder, and pursed his lips.

Appeal to the Seigneurie, indeed! It



was well to know of such a project in order to circumvent it. Clovis had been awkward and unskilful ; and he, the abbé, must assume henceforth more openly the command of operations. Inopportune stiff necks are productive of no end of worry. Why could not the silly zany have done as he was bid, have accepted every suggestion, leaving further action to the others ? The all-important object was to secure a proper will, and that point gained, both Pharamond and Aglaé were well aware of what the next step would have to be. Clovis, the shilly-shally, must henceforth be excluded from a hand in the management of affairs. The lucky fellow should reap his share of profit by and by without the sweat of labour. His abortive interview with his wife had produced one good result. He was more than ever exaspe-

rated against her, and swore, with needless oaths, that he would never look on her or speak to her again.

“In that he must please himself,” Pharamond remarked with indifference; “but he must take up his pen and write. If he would cease fretting and fidgeting, and sit down, his obliging brother would dictate, and the epistle should be of the shortest. Would mademoiselle kindly listen and suggest, since for her there were no secrets?”

The letter placed an hour later in the hand of Gabrielle ran thus :—

“MADAME,—Your instructions shall be obeyed. I have sent to Blois for a notary.

“Your affectionate husband,

“CLOVIS.”



## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE SPIDERS SPIN.

How provoking and how unfair to be called upon to drag out the years of our earthly pilgrimage during so stormy a period as this one! With unexpected bombshells exploding at one's feet, what was the use of sketching elaborate schemes which accident would most likely shiver? The abbé had already been obliged to change his tactics several times in consequence of untoward circumstances, and now from a clearing heaven there rained down missiles whose unexpected prox-

imity sharpened his ire. "Why was I born so late?" he asked himself with muttered curses. "Under Louis XV., *le Bien-Aimé*, everybody did what they liked, provided that his majesty smiled. And if his own fancy was not thwarted, that monarch must have been much addicted to smiling, for he found the world a pleasant place. And now, just a few years later, there seemed to be not such a thing as a smile left anywhere. They had been so lavishly showered by the *bien-aimé* and his lotus-eating coterie that the stock was completely exhausted, and humanity had to put up with execrations as a substitute.

Each time that a courier arrived with intelligence of what was passing in the capital, the male occupants of Lorge shuddered, guessing that the news was

bad. Bad, forsooth! The ball set a rolling was tearing down the hillside with such velocity that the sight thereof took away the breath.

Old de Vaux, grateful ever to the marquis and his affinity for their treatment of his sciatic nerve, came riding over with crumpled gazettes in his pocket, his eyes goggling in his head. If the whitened locks upon his pate had not been artificial, they would have stood up on end. "What are we all coming to?" was the burthen of his wail. If the world was coming to an abrupt conclusion, why did it not perform a dignified smash and vanish into vacuum in smoke, instead of first permitting that over-rated creation, man, to show what a base thing he was?

Smash! Paris, beautiful Paris, had come to smash. From a paradise it was become

a pandemonium where all that was best and noblest was torn by devils' pincers.

Sciatica? Oh, yes. It was charming well, thanks to the delightful and indefatigable pupil of Mesmer and the enlightened marquis. A pair so good as they would certainly be canonized—so would the prophet. Madame and Angelique were as disgusted as the baron, but sent kindest messages to all. Would they allow their patient to unfold the latest budget?

Then the old gentleman would drone out before a long-suffering but apparently appreciative audience the result of his private lucubrations, and pour forth as well those of his lady and of Angelique. The seigneurs, he declared, must select the strongest fortress in the province, arm and victual it, and thus secure from the scum, look out for better times.

Of course, the crescendo of Parisian sinfulness found its echo, of fluctuating intensity, in the provinces. The timorous old baroness and her daughter preferred their garden to possible insult on the roads. Moreover, there was little to be gained by visiting at Lorge now. The marquise since her return from the capital, had been vastly frigid and stand-off—a stuck-up piece of goods. It was certain, now that she had her fabulous possessions in her hands, that a mere country noble's family were too contemptible to touch. It was equally clear that the oaf who was called chevalier had no honourable intentions, and that it would be more than imprudent to place so chaste a specimen as Angelique within reach of his brandy-laden breath. And so it came about that the only neighbours of the fair sex in the vicinity

visited less and less at Lorge, and that the old baron when he trotted over on his prad, looked as a matter of course for the society of the mesmerists to whom he owed so much, and ceased to ask to see the chatelaine.

Not understanding her, the baron had always been frightened of Gabrielle—one shade less than of the abbé. Strange! When that gentleman first came among them, the baron and all the booby squires voted him the most charming of acquisitions. Now, somehow, he was to be avoided as much as might be, for his tongue was sharp and his wit scathing, and he was no respecter of persons. The abbé would sometimes take up the old gentleman in his claws, as it were, toy with him as cat does with a mouse, till he was bewildered and breathless ; then turn him inside out with a



gesture of contempt, and fling him aside. This was terribly disrespectful to a Vaux of Vaux, but it certainly was a fact, whose enormity was only revealed by slow degrees, that the abbé was not averse to treating a Vaux de Vaux (with a thousand quarterings) as if he were no more than a puppet. Having arrived at and digested this stupendous fact, it stood to reason that the baron disliked the abbé as much as he dared ; but, at the same time, the counsel of that ghostly man was so worldly-wise ; he was so respected by the mesmerists, appealed to by them on every occasion as an oracle, that in moments of startling difficulty such as were now of frequent occurrence, it was only natural that the baron should amble over from Montbazon to crave the oracle's advice.

A budget, indeed ! Almost every day

was stamped by some inconceivable event. History was making up for casual napping by a spell of feverish haste. A catalogue of years was crowded into weeks. The poor old globe was spinning round so rapidly that it would certainly be shot out of its orbit, to the annihilation of the insects on its surface.

When, six weeks after their arrival in the country, the incidents of the tenth of August reached far Touraine, the cunning abbé had the gazette wherein they were chronicled laid on the table of the marquise, whom he justly calculated would be frozen with horror. That her innocent benefactress should be summoned by destiny in fulfilment of prophecy, to drain so full a cup of bitterness was appalling, and naturally set her friend reflecting upon the darkness of her own horoscope.

The sensitive and haughty queen was indeed humbled ; her defenders massacred, her home converted into a shambles.

After the storming of the Tuileries, the populace, blood-drunk, wreaked their insensate fury upon all alike, irrespective of age or sex. The gentlemen-ushers, pages, doorkeepers, even the lowly scullions of the kitchen were, without distinction, butchered. It was impossible to move a yard over the polished floors without treading on a corpse, stripped and horribly mutilated. Every corner of the palace was plundered, its furniture flung out of the window. When there were no more Royalists to kill, the rioters turned upon each other, making the fatal day the fête of carnage and devastation. The mangled bodies of the seven hundred murdered Swiss were covered with those

of *sans-culottes*. It was a carnival of slaughter. On the Place Louis XV., groups of men and women amused themselves by severing the heads of the slain and tearing their flesh like tigers. It was a relief to know that the royal family were safe within the Temple; and yet, for what further suffering had they been rescued? The situation was so alarming that foreign ambassadors left Paris in a body, the last to go milady Sutherland, who stood by Marie Antoinette in her travail till the prison gates were closed on her.

Then came the incident, so often repeated in history, of a hopeless combat with a spirit which, easily raised, it is found impossible to lay. General Lafayette, perceiving, with distress, the results of his own teaching, implored his army to rise in

defence of king and constitution, and being met with laughter, fled.

On the second of September — a Sunday, whereon time hung heavy on the hands—the brilliant idea occurred to certain zealous citizens, headed by one Maillard, that it would be fine fun to make hay in the prisons. Were there not the Abbaye, the Carmelites, the Chatelet, La Force, Salpêtrière, Bicêtre, all crammed with wicked people who did not approve of *sans-culottes*? What a delicious amusement would it be for the dull Sunday to teach them how bad they were. With yells, a throng, increasing in volume at each street corner, swept towards the Abbaye—men naked to the waist, with foaming lips and rolling eyes, and arms clotted with gore. Knives and sharp pikes made short but merry work. Re-

calcitrant maidens who refused to shout "Vive la Nation!" were compelled to drink the blood of their relations. The massacre continued all day and through the night. But why go into the full details of the hideous story? France was become a dangerous lunatic who had beaten and trampled on her keepers.

It was a desperate shock to Gabrielle when she read of the fate of her friend, Louise, Princesse de Lamballe. That ill-starred lady had, as she knew, been imprisoned in La Force; and it was with a thrill that chilled her blood that she perused the details of her murder. Sure so horrible and ferocious a deed had never been done before! The marquise read, in the gazettes cunningly placed by the abbé, with blanched cheek, of how the beautiful favourite of the stricken queen had been

dragged to the prison threshold, there to be slain by inches ; of how her body was stripped and mutilated and flung in derision on a dung-heap, while her head was borne on a pike with auburn tresses flying, and flourished at the Temple under the window of the royal prisoners. Unhappy Louise ! Unfortunate Marie Antoinette ! Concerning one the sinister prophecy was accomplished ; concerning the other it would be soon. What of the third, which concerned the Marquise de Gange ? Morbid fancy, forsooth ! No, indeed. Her fate was sealed, like theirs. What must be, must. She had lulled herself in false security.

Since Fate had decreed that the present occupants of Lorge were to live in so unsavoury an era, it behoved the ruling spirit of the group, Monsieur l'Abbé, to extract

what advantage he could out of the disadvantages. In the first place, outside events were so terribly engrossing that local gossip and tittle-tattle for the time had lost their charm. The general feeling of insecurity, too, was such that the marquise could be taught without difficulty that this was not the moment for aristocrats to appeal to the Seigneurie. What was a petty bit of jealousy, or even a family misunderstanding, by the side of a massacre of thousands? A protest at such a crisis on so paltry a subject would be justly met with contempt.

Then as History kept plying her shuttle with lightning speed, the abbé shook his head and marvelled, congratulating himself that the great obstacle to his plan had been removed, since time was becoming precious.



For the new will was now an accomplished fact, and lay safe in yonder desk which bore the cypher of the marquis.

Mademoiselle Brunelle had intimated to the chatelaine, with a heavenly resignation worthy of all praise, that for appearance' sake she would accept the permission to linger on a week or two and then disappear for ever. Her note, penned in a small and irreproachable calligraphy, both relieved and troubled the marquise. That she had consented to depart without a struggle was a relief, but her mild and simple expressions of gratitude for past favours caused Gabrielle a twinge of conscience. Of course it was inevitable that the woman should be made to go, but the marquise would have felt more satisfied with herself if the creature had been vulgar and played the termagant

instead of assuming the seraph. It was a million pities that she could not have gone on behaving as at first, when her mistress, finding her useful, had welcomed and tried to make a friend of her. The social earthquake had so far shaken the city of Blois that professors began to find it dangerous to cultivate aristocratic blossoms, preferring, with an eye to a whole skin, the discharging of declamatory fireworks at clubs and political assemblies. Of course there could be no question ever again of bringing mademoiselle and her late charges together; and yet it was a pity that it must be so, since the minds of the dear ones were lying fallow.

News arrived of changes, legislative and warlike, such as would transform the map of France. The jewels appertaining to the crown were annexed. The National

Convention, just sprung into being, decreed the abolition of Royalty ; proclaimed a Republic. The republican armies were, contrary to expectation, crowned with victory. They conquered Savoy, occupied Nice ; swept from French territory the forces of the Allies. The small remaining scraps of the property of emigrants, long threatened and plucked at now and again, were actually seized *en bloc*. A list of pains and penalties of the severest kind was launched at such bad citizens as were gangrened with royalism.

At the present rate of progress the country would soon be no safer than the towns. Aristocrats would be dragged from their retreats, consigned to local jails, finished off in batches by a *noyade* or a *fusillade*—be drowned or shot in droves. Clearly, there was no time for

palaver or parleying, or the days would pass away when it would be possible to emigrate. What a mercy—the abbé never wearied of repeating the refrain—that the Maréchal de Brèze should have transferred his wealth to Geneva, and that his obstinate and stiff-necked daughter should have been induced to change her will!

Mademoiselle Brunelle was equally convinced with the abbé that there was no time to squander. If she were to remain too long, the marquise would become suspicious and insist on her departure. Of course she need not travel further than Blois, but it is well to be on the spot when something important is to take place, especially when your coadjutor is so double-faced as was the abbé. The susceptibilities of Clovis must be respected. What the schemers had to do must be

done speedily, silently, and neatly. When she thought of it all the low laughter of Aglaé rumbled. How surprised and mortified would the abbé be when in the end he found himself circumvented! She was to put out her paw for the chestnuts and keep half the booty for her trouble? So Pharamond had picturesquely put it. Not so. Unwittingly it was his own paw that was to be protruded, and in his case the fable would be realized. The excellent lady had graduated in his own school, and it is given to clever pupils oftentimes to outstrip the master.

Sure, now that they held the necessary document, their task was of the most infantine simplicity. It had been ascertained by cautious probing that Clovis could be counted on not to defend his wife. He would be politely invited to bury his head

in the sand until that which must be was accomplished. By skilful manipulation his loathing for his better half was increasing as steadily in volume as a rolling snow-ball, and was assuming the proportions of a fixed idea. Gabrielle had decreed the banishment of the dear affinity. With many a groan he had acquiesced, being assured by two whisperers as he wrote to their dictation, that it was but a matter of form. "If she conquers, after all," he had said as he flung down the pen, "I will never forgive either of you. You have some project in your minds for the arrangement of the situation. What it may be I cannot guess, but I would have you know that if you fail I shall hate you both quite as much as her."

Aglaé and the abbé had exchanged a glance of scorn over his shoulder, in that

they were forced to work with such a sorry tool. No matter. If we paddle in thick mud, a little elbow-grease and water will make us clean again. Both began from opposite points of view to understand that the removal of Clovis might perchance have to follow his wife's. After her removal they would journey to Geneva, divide the fortune—hush the remorseful groans which so pusillanimous an object as Clovis was certain to indulge in—possibly drive him to drink, the natural corollary of remorse—and so into his grave. This was the abbé's view. Aglaé went further. Arrived at Geneva, she would speedily become the marquise, and certain of dominion over her spouse—so long as his life was allowed to last—would secure to herself the reversion of her predecessors' fortune, and politely dismiss the brothers.

All that, however, was as yet in the clouds, and there was no time to lose. To a certain extent, the marquis must now be admitted to the council, but the cautious finger of the governess must be kept upon his pulse, to ascertain how far he could be trusted not to scream and make an uproar. Such a task was exactly suited to a lady of such tact and discretion as mademoiselle, and she gladly undertook the office.

Toinon, mightily displeased at the way things were going, was racked by apprehension. It seemed to her as if she and her mistress were being gradually enwrapped in the glutinous film of spiders, which uncomely creatures by and by would quietly devour them. Such a *ménage* as that of Lorge, despite its outward calm, was abnormal. Her dear mistress dwelt in strict retirement in her own house. A band of



harpies (among which, I regret to say, she reckoned her master) were secretly conspiring, and the result of their machinations could not but be harmful. They whispered in corners, deliberated with closed doors, discussed and argued something earnestly at all times and seasons, and if somebody approached them, they suddenly grew silent. What could they be conspiring? For two pins, popping her insulted vanity into her pocket, she would write to the truant Jean, of whom she vaguely heard sometimes as being quite of importance at Blois. If he had grown out of his love for Toinon, his blindness was to be deplored; but righteously indignant as that damsel felt at his neglect, she never for a moment doubted his honesty, however deplorable his opinions. Jean respected both the marquise and her

foster-sister, and if carried away from his allegiance by politics, she felt none the less certain that, were she to summon him, he would come. But how could she summon him? He would laugh at her fears, and, on the principle of "Wolf, wolf," would not obey a second summons. All she could report was that madame was unhappy and neglected, that the objectionable ex-governess had come and was on the point of going, and that, meanwhile, she and the brothers were given to whispering in corners. It was absurd, and Jean would be justified in laughing at her. He had left his dog behind him in her care, as an unfit companion for a deputy at Blois, and as the faithful beast followed her about, gazing into her eyes with canine sympathy, she would suddenly sometimes sink upon the

floor, and clasping his woolly head in her comely arms, whisper to him, "Oh, my dear! I am so sorely troubled. How I wish you could tell me what to do!"

As to her master, he was quite different from what he used to be. In old days, who so spick and span, so punctiliously prim in his attire? His face used then to wear a dreamy expression of philanthropical beatitude, which, if somewhat trying, was free of blame. Now he neglected his dress, his shoulders were rounded. He muttered between his teeth, as he wandered with bent head, and when he raised it, his eyes were bloodshot, his features convulsed by passion—torn by some secret dread. He was always brooding, and on some subject which stirred the lees, erstwhile so undisturbed, of evil thoughts. The marquis was changing à

*vue d'œil*, and the change was not for the better.

Toinon, with her dog behind her, was slowly mounting the stair one day, revolving for the thousandth time the pros and cons of her perplexity, when she perceived that the outer door of the abbé's sanctum was open—an unusual circumstance, for had he not taken to himself this tiny chamber by reason of its double doors? The abigail hesitated. Should she descend to prying? If she did it would be for the best motives, and if she heard anything that concerned her not it might as well be consigned to a tomb. She could detect the mellifluous accents of the abbé, apparently in remonstrance, then the voice of mademoiselle, very low and earnest, broken by something smothered from the marquis, who spoke in tones of

pain. What could they be discussing so earnestly? Raising her finger to caution the dog to silence, she stole down a-tiptoe, and holding her breath, listened.

Not for long, however, for the marquis of a sudden cried out, "I will never consent to such strong measures—never—never—never. They are too full of risk;" and was evidently moving towards the door when his progress was arrested by the abbé.

"Leave it to us, dear brother; leave it to us," the latter was repeating, soothingly. "If not your poor brother and your devoted friend, who else in the wide world are you to trust? It is as plain as daylight that we must leave France ere long, and your obstinate wife will never consent to go with us. Well, well; she doubtless will be safe here if we are not, and if we

get into trouble, she will be rather pleased than otherwise. Do as you are advised. Take yonder document and raise on it at Blois or Tours a little money for present expenses. We are out of cash, as you know, since you so properly stood out against the allowance. You can easily raise money on that paper. Is not everybody scraping together all they can in order to be off while there is time? Go, dear lad, perform your portion of the task, and leave the rest to us."

"What of her, then?" Clovis inquired in doubt.

"Meddle, meddle, meddle—why will you meddle?" retorted Pharamond, laughing. "I daresay she will live on here for many years, or perhaps not—who knows? Suffice it for the moment that we men must fly across the border."

Then came something more from mademoiselle, which the eavesdropper could not catch, and Toinon had but time to flee with all her speed to the upper storey, ere the marquis opened the door. He was sighing and moaning and muttering in most extraordinary fashion.

Peeping from the landing above she could see that he trembled like a leaf, and did not fail to mark the abbé's sneer of triumph as he looked after his departing brother.

"He has been sent away from Lorge," she murmured, with wrinkles on her brow. "He is to go, and to take madame's testament along with him. Those two demons are victorious, and we are at their mercy. What do they intend to do? Nothing that bodes good to us."



## CHAPTER XXII.

### DOMESTIC COOKERY.

THAT Clovis should have thought proper to leave Lorge without notice, or any hint of his intentions, was not a subject for vexation now to Gabrielle. She saw the carriage disappear round the corner with a valet and a valise in the rumble, and the eyes of the occupant fixed steadily upon the postilion. No smile, or nod, or wave of a hand for her to whom he owed so much. She could contemplate him now without a wince or heartache, as calmly as we examine uncanny specimens of beetledom in



a glass case. She prayed Heaven that her son, the dear Victor, should not grow up too like his father. One good point about the marquis's going was that he was separated from that woman. Then she began to wonder a little that he should have prematurely torn himself away before the moment of her flitting. That was good. Perhaps he had acted thus on purpose to keep up the show of appearances which all agreed was to be maintained. Be that as it might, it was not probable that the woman would linger on in a false position—*pour les beaux yeux de l'abbé*—and so the chatelaine, sitting with the dear ones in the moat garden, was prepared at any moment to witness the departure of another carriage. And after that? Would Clovis return when the coast was clear, or remain at a distance in dudgeon, leaving her to the

tender mercies of his brothers? What then? She had given way, or seemed to do so, for peace' sake. They could require no more of her, and would doubtless respect her seclusion. It was curious to think though of the whimsicality of the situation. She, Gabrielle de Gange, erstwhile the reigning belle, with all at her feet that the world had to give, was living now with unruffled equanimity under the same roof as sheltered the man whom she had learned to look on as a devil.

It was October, and the leaves were circling over the grass in whispering eddies. The mournful days of late autumn have a charm of their own, as nature still peeps forth half-chilled from under the closing slab of the tomb. The monotony of mundane existence is in tune with the scene, and as all that is pleasant

of the year slowly vanishes, we dream and moralize in a regretful way, which is not discontent.

Nature is dying, but will live again anon. Ah! what of us who gaze ahead striving to peer into the unknown? Have we not learned to know too well that the Future is the grave in which all our poor puny ambitions are to lie, never to arise any more, and yet we would fain examine the resting-place where Hope is to play chief mourner! Most of us who have reached middle age have had ambition crushed out of us long since, and we can smile with quiet amusement at the vaulting aspirations of our youth.

Gabrielle, while tranquilly embroidering, was not averse to recalling the past, summoning on the disc of memory the pageants of Versailles, the innocent

bucolics of Trianon, the magnificent fêtes at the Tuileries. Where were all the gaily gilded puppets now? The Tuileries was a Golgotha, Trianon a nest for owls. The lovely Lamballe had been hacked to pieces by demons; their majesties were doing gruesome penance for the sins of others; even the saintly and immaculate Elizabeth, one of the purest and noblest women who ever trod the earth, was also enduring long-drawn and excruciating pangs of martyrdom.

Laying down her embroidery as she reviewed these things, Gabrielle would clasp her hands behind her head, and marvel, as others in similarly incongruous situations have done, whether Providence is not a myth. Every fibre of the human soul revolts against the monstrous doctrine that the innocent shall suffer for the guilty,

and yet every day we see that it obtains, and always has obtained from the time of Adam downwards. Such gloomy reflections should not perplex young and pretty heads, and yet the marquise was unable to conquer melancholy. Perhaps it was induced by the season, perhaps by the germs of illness. She must have dreamed too long in the moat garden without being provided with sufficient wraps. Certainly she had caught a chill, for when Toinon brought her as usual her morning chocolate, a few days after the marquis's departure, she found her shivering and feverish, with chattering teeth and laboured breath. Drawing aside the heavy curtains of the ancestral bed, Toinon gazed long and anxiously at her mistress, who said, turning impatiently, "You stare as if I were a ghost!"

“Madame thinks she has caught cold?”  
Toinon agreed quietly. “Madame was always too fond of sitting in the open air.”

“I knew I was going to be unwell,” her mistress observed drowsily, “for last night I could scarce touch my supper. When the palate is affected, things taste quite differently. The good Bertrand sent up some of my favourite cakes, as light as if made by fairies, and somehow they seemed quite coppery. Do something, Toinon ; give them to your dog, for the dish is scarcely touched, and I would not have Bertrand think I am ungrateful.”

“And you were always so partial to those cakes !” drily remarked Toinon, with a peculiar smile. “Yes, I will give them to the dog.”

“First make me some tisane,” entreated Gabrielle. “I am languid and

feverish, and my throat is parched and burning."

Toinon slowly shook her head and went straight into the adjoining boudoir, where the light refectory described as supper was always laid out on a low table. Her movement was so abrupt that had she not been much preoccupied, she could not have failed to perceive the whisk of a black coat-tail, as it disappeared into the long saloon. Had she opened the door four minutes earlier, she would have seen a dapper figure clad in black leaning over the plate that held the confectionery, and have heard a soft voice mutter, "Only half a cake. It must have had a peculiar taste."

As it was, Toinon saw nothing of this, but finding the room empty, moved swiftly to the tray, took up a cake and smelt it.

A thin, pale face was watching her through a door-chink with gleaming eyes.

She again shook her head, and murmuring, "Can they be so wicked?" carried the plate away.

Along the corridor she sped, and down the stairs, unconscious of a dark shadow moving noiselessly, till she reached her own apartment. At sound of the well-known footstep, an animal within, hitherto quiescent, began to whine and yelp, and beat itself against the door.

"Patience, patience — poor hound," Toinon said aloud. "Is it wise to be in so great a hurry? Even now, I cannot believe it!"

She turned the handle and the boisterous dog dashed the plate from her hand with its great paws. She picked up two of the cakes which had remained



whole, and with the same peculiar smile of meaning she had worn above, watched the hound as he ravenously devoured the fragments. There was still a piece left—a large one—and she pushed it towards him with her foot.

“Poor dog! Forgive me, Jean,” she said, “if what I think is true.”

The shadow without gazed in on the scene with craning neck. “She suspects,” the abbé muttered. “What will she do with the others?”

As though in direct answer to the question, Toinon turned rapidly from the animal which she had been eyeing with a suspicious frown, and carefully taking up the remaining pieces of confectionery wrapped them in paper. Then she stood stroking her chin irresolute. The dog approached and wagged his tail, rubbing

his muzzle in her hand, as his way was when he wanted something. "What is it, poor fellow?" she enquired, stroking his head. "Water! I thought as much!" Filling a basin, she placed it on the floor, and the dog drank eagerly till the last drop was drained, then curled himself up to sleep.

Starting, the abigail took up the parcel, went to a cupboard, selected a bottle from a row and mixed some of its contents with water.

"Mustard," murmured the abbé, slinking into the shade. "That stupid woman said there was no especial taste. See what it is to have to deal with bunglers."

Wearing his most unpleasant scowl, and grinding his sharp teeth, he stole along the corridor, and moving up a step or two turned and came down again humming a

blythesome stave, just as Toinon appeared at the bottom, holding the parcel and a glass.

“Our pretty Toinon is vastly occupied,” he laughed, merrily. “But for fear of the stalwart arm of burly Jean, I would steal a kiss from those sweet lips.”

“Maybe you will feel that arm sooner than you expect,” she said, scarce able to steady her voice ; “make way, and if you dare to touch me, I will spit in your villain’s face.”

This was clearly not the moment for persiflage, so with a careless shrug of indulgence for the coarse manners of the lower classes, the abbé stood aside. “What a dear darling little vixen,” he shouted up the stairs. “I pity poor Jean Boulot, despite his thews and sinews.”

The first attempt was a failure, an egregiously contemptible and inartistic failure, and all due to that inveterate bungler. Had not mademoiselle's coadjutor suggested that liquid is preferable to solid, for the purpose they both had at heart, since you only munch a biscuit, whereas you take a preliminary sip at a liquid and then, your mouth feeling a trifle dry, take a longer gulp before remarking that the taste is peculiar? And the execrable Aglaé had insisted on the cakes, declaring that if you are fond of a particular cake, you will indulge in several before any little peculiarity can manifest itself. And the fool—the hopelessly obstinate and self-sufficient idiot — had perpetrated another bungle, a worse one than before, since Gabrielle had only bitten into one of her favourites, while the

others had been gobbled by the dog. The dog would die ; no doubt of it, and Toinon's suspicions would be justified. What would she do with that tell-tale parcel ? An extremely awkward mistake of mademoiselle's. There was one way out of the dilemma. The abbé must be taken ill as well as the lady of the house ; complain of a taste of copper, make an outcry in the kitchen, and discover that the careless cook had spread his materials upon a copper-plate that had not been cleared of verdigris.

Toinon was busy all day with her mistress, whom she found in a half lethargy, with burning palms and widely distended pupils. She had some ado to force the mustard down her throat ; but, this done, she soon had the pleasure of seeing the patient revive. By evening,

Gabrielle was calm, but exhausted, and when Toinon descended to the kitchen to fetch some bouillon (which Bertrand would have first to taste) she was astonished to hear that the abbé was screaming with agony, kicking in frightful convulsions.

Toinon smiled her peculiar smile again, and uttered a few common-place words of sympathy.

“Badly played,” she said to herself, “he might as well have bethought him that the symptoms should be lethargy and coma.”

M. Bertrand, the cook, was in high dudgeon. How dared anybody hint that he had poisoned madame’s biscuits? It was all owing to that oaf of a scullion, who had laid the large square copper-plate on the confectionery table, without remembering that it had been unused for a

week. Was he, a *cordon bleu*, a chef *de premier calibre*, to be blamed for the stupidity of a scullion? He would be expected to clean his own saucepans next. When the marquis returned—who always appreciated efforts to please—he would give warning and leave this *sale maison*, which was only fit for cockroaches and rats.

“Go back to Paris!” gibed Toinon. “Safer where you are, believe me. A chef with so splendid a reputation for pampering the palates of the gangrened aristocracy, would surely be strung up to a lantern! This bouillon looks excellent,” she added saucily; “but M. Bertrand will be good enough to sip two spoonfuls, lest the scullion should have dipped his fingers in it.”

Next day, thanks to Toinon’s vigilant solicitude, the marquise was sufficiently

recovered to sit at her embroidery as usual. Holding out a hand to the abigail while tears rose to the eyes of both, "My sister," she said, "it is worth while to be a little ill just to learn how much we are beloved."

Alas! beloved! Poor lady. Hated by four persons without consciences, who were panting and thirsting for her death! A target for poisoned arrows!

After sagely considering the matter, Toinon made up her mind that if she did not interfere, she might become in some sort an accessory to a tragedy. In whom was faith to be placed? Honest Jean? What could he do, if he were to come, in the face of such diabolical ingenuity? He would learn that his favourite dog—companion of many trudgings through the woods at all times and seasons—had died



of poisoned cakes. But then was it not admitted in the household, that the abbé as well as the marquise had accidentally partaken, and that the abbé of the two had been the most sick? Had not varlets and kitchen wenches cowered and clung together at sound of his piercing screams? He was well again, for he had had the presence of mind to swallow mustard. The marquise had recovered, thanks to a like precaution. Toinon had been cunning enough to keep two cakes which, when the time came should be examined, and if the abbé were foolish enough to declare that he had been poisoned by similar articles, it would be easy to prove that his agonies were sham, as they were not the natural results of such a poison as had been administered to Gabrielle.

Meanwhile, something must be done, and the question that troubled Toinon was what that something was to be. At last she made up her mind and broke the ice.

“Will madame pardon me for what may appear an act of presumption,” she inquired, gently rearranging the wraps about the invalid. “I have taken something on myself which may anger madame, who will, I know, believe that if I was guilty of an error it was made through excess of zeal.”

There was a pause, unbroken by Gabrielle, who glanced at her foster-sister with a wan and wearied look that was full of pathos.

Presently she raised the fingers of the waiting maid to her face, and stroked her cheek with them.

“What is this grand effort of the intellect?” she asked, cheerily. “I know it is something well intentioned.”

“I have written a letter in madame’s name and sent it off by specia courier.”

“Not to the marquis?” cried Gabrielle, the colour flushing over her face and neck.

Poor soul! The marquis! Much good would it be to write to him, unless to request him to order a coffin.

“No,” Toinon said, quietly. “It cuts me to the heart to see madame so solitary, and during a convalescence too, a time when we always brood and consider the least pleasant subjects. I have written to the Maréchale de Brèze, stating that you have been ill, but are out of danger, and would be glad of a visit from your mother.”

Gabrielle remained thoughtful, still stroking Toinon’s fingers. Why not?

The maréchale owed a visit, and the absence of her husband on business would account for the seclusion of his wife. Moreover, it would be a splendid thing to lure the old dame from dangerous Paris, where Mother Guillotine was commencing to display a Catholic taste in the way of food. Yes ; from all points of view it was an admirable idea to induce Madame de Brèze to visit Lorge. Why ! it was a thousand years at least since she had set eyes upon the darlings ! Her own and only grandchildren ! How shockingly reprehensible. How she would joy in marking each trait of genius, and how proud their mother would be to show how cultured were their minds ! The maréchale's mind was considerably less stored than her daughter's, but she would appreciate with greater awe the progress of

their climb up Parnassus. Did they not write each other poems and moral essays, after the manner of the Scuderi, and of the encyclopædist ladies! — such prodigiously clever verses, and such heavenly prose sermons! The more she considered it the more enchanted was she that Toinon should have taken this move upon herself. Had it been left to her, she would have doubted, have written a dozen letters only to tear them up, weighing in that tender and over-scrupulous conscience of hers whether it was right or wrong to drag an old lady to the wilds of Touraine at such a troublous moment. She would have considered whether it was not her duty to have unselfishly exhorted the ancient dame never to stir out of her modest abode; never even to open her window, lest by the act she should be

drawn into the maw of Mother Guillotine.

The more she thought over it the more delighted was she with the idea, and, opening her arms, clasped Toinon to her breast.

“My dear, my dear,” she murmured, fondly, “what should I do without you? Let the dear mother come. Together we will make her welcome.”





## CHAPTER XXIII.

### A PASSAGE OF ARMS.

MADemoiselle AGLAÉ BRUNELLE was not on a bed of roses, and her growing impatience took the form of tartness. If Clovis could have looked on his affinity in his absence her prospects of becoming some day Marquise de Gange might have been less promising. In truth, she was very cross, and took no trouble to conceal her mood from Pharamond or Phebus. It was not her fault, but that of the silly Bertrand, that the cakes should have had a metallic flavour. She therefore soundly

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rated that worthy for his clumsiness, and threatened him with pains and penalties. The chef glanced at her with two pig's-eyes set close together, and replied, "I was engaged in Paris by Monsieur l'Abbé, not by mademoiselle, who should undertake her dirty work herself." He had no personal feeling against the recluse upstairs, but man must live, and with the present he was to receive he intended to escape from the French caldron, and make up for a trifling lapsus in another land by a future of exemplary virtue.

Energetic mademoiselle was all for taking the bull by the horns and acting with decision. Why beat about the bush in this provoking way, she argued, since the chatelaine was completely in their power? The domestics were the abbé's creatures, drafted one by one, and



dropped each into his place. Madame de Vaux and Angelique were too much alarmed to leave their own precincts ; and now that the marquis was gone, the old gentleman had no motive for ambling over from Montbazon, since he had never understood Gabrielle, and instinctively disliked the brothers. He was grateful to Aglaé in that matter of the sciatic nerve, but it was not his place as a seigneur to make morning calls on a dependant. To prevent prying from without, it was easy to spread a report that Madame la Marquise de Gange had been attacked by typhus fever. The rustics of Touraine had a wholesome dread of the disease. Madame had none on whom she could rely except her faithful abigail. Would it not be the most natural thing in the world if the devoted foster-sister were

likewise to succumb to the malady? There was nothing whatever to stop the prosecution of their plans, and it has long been an axiom that what has to be done is best done quickly. There was nothing to cause the delay but the abbé's tortuous method. It is said that each of us has been an animal in a previous phase, and that a shade of likeness, physical or moral, or both, yet clings to us in this. Mademoiselle was convinced that in his last existence the abbé had been a serpent. It was his nature to wriggle and twist, and he could not for the life of him move straight. If he beheld a dove upon a branch he must needs coil himself elaborately to fascinate it, instead of protruding a tongue and gobbling it up at once.

These and other views, did she propound to Pharamond, marching up and

down the room as her wont was, when much in earnest, with elephantine tread, while the chevalier blinked at her in fear. A wonderful woman, an awful and terrible woman! It was not surprising that Clovis should have sunk under her thrall. She dared to beard, and even flout the still more awful Pharamond, and the two crossed swords sometimes with such a clash of arms that Phebus shivered in alarm. What two such strong ones willed, would certainly take place. No doubt about it. The poor thing upstairs was doomed. No effort that he, Phebus, could make, might stay her doom. Why, then, make any effort? He could only shed maudlin tears and wish her well through her misery. He quite agreed with Aglaé, that the inevitable should take place at once.

Now lecturing and advice that looked

too like command, was by no means palatable to Pharamond, and he had much ado to maintain the suavity of his temper. The idea of typhus was not bad, but it would entail certain consequences. Nearly everybody at this time, both in France and England, was seamed with smallpox, and dreadful as the scourge was, familiarity had paled its terrors. The report of a spread of typhus, on the other hand, was enough to depopulate a district. Happily, since the period which occupies us, advancing science has done much to mitigate its horrors, but in the eighteenth century, the sickening details of its course were enough to appal the bravest. The Marquise de Gange and her abigail having succumbed to the scourge, the inmates of the chateau must flee, or endure ostracism—they would be banned like lepers.

Though by the terms of the new will, the marquis would quietly inherit, it would not do for him and his brothers, after assisting at a typhus deathbed, to stay at Blois to transact necessary business. Unluckily the unstable legatee could not be trusted to do much unaided. As had been decided he was to raise money on his expectations, sufficient to waft the party to Geneva, and keep them in proper style during tedious but necessary negotiations. It was obvious, therefore, that mademoiselle's impatience was vexatious and ill-advised. When Clovis wrote to say that the sum was raised, then they would perform their one act drama, and, bowing, retire behind the scenes.

"Surely there ought to be no difficulty about raising the necessary sum," grumbled Aglaé, with arms crossed, and moody

brow. Clovis is so reprehensively tardy. What can he be doing all this while! I would have settled the matter myself in half-an-hour, if the mission could have been confided to me."

Phebus blinked more than usual. Oh! 'A wonderful woman, who appeared to him as a vision of fate in a violent hurry. Could she who had been sprightly and kittenish, be so athirst for another woman's blood?

"You deem yourself vastly clever," sneered Pharamond, waxing wroth. "Can you not remember that every mistake has been due to your stupidity? Half-an-hour, forsooth! Do you not know that bullion is as rare a commodity as diamonds? that to refuse payment in assignats is to risk the guillotine, and that beyond the border, such things are but dirty paper?

A pretty figure we should cut if we rattled into the courtyard of the Etoile d'Or, and attempted to pay the Swiss postilions with dead leaves! One cannot, of course, expect common sense from a woman, any more than grapes from thistles. Your querulous importunity is wearying. You must keep your promise and be content to be led by me."

Even Pharamond was disconcerted, and Phebus cowered, when Aglaé dashed into the breakfast-room one day like a whirlwind, her eyes aflame, her dusky visage black with fury. She moved swiftly up and down, unable to articulate, upsetting the chairs in her career. What could have happened to enrage her thus? Verily, she was becoming a deplorable, insufferable nuisance, and it would be well to make an end of it.

"Patience," she blurted out at last, thumping into her accustomed seat, and scattering the glasses. "You never weary of exhorting me to patience. Perhaps you will yourself remember the elementary fact that events will not stand still while you are parleying."

"What now?" Pharamond asked calmly.

"This now," retorted mademoiselle. "The Maréchale de Brèze has just arrived with an army of domestics, and is closeted upstairs with her daughter."

This was news; unwelcome and unexpected news. Had the old lady arrived on an errand similar to that of the family solicitor? Hardly. If Gabrielle had again secretly sought protection, M. Galland would have come himself. And an army of servants, too! Servants are



argus-eyed and uncharitable in their conclusions. These people could not be wheedled or cajoled like those selected by the abbé. Aglaé's wrath, though coarsely expressed, was justified. The irruption of a foreign element, just at this juncture, was unfortunate.

"We must frighten them away," Pharamond observed, quietly peeling a pear.

Mademoiselle snorted in scorn, while the abbé sat wrapped in thought. Why was the maréchale here now? Had anything fresh occurred in Paris, which had impelled flight? If that had been so, she would not have travelled with a retinue. She was timid and nervous, and fearful of bandits on the road. She could scarcely have been summoned by Gabrielle, since the latter had no suspicion of the cakes. Pharamond had satisfied himself

of that, by knocking humbly and inserting a head, while ostentatiously remaining on the threshold. "Pardon my intrusion," he had meekly purred, "but anxiety compels me to ask after your health. In Clovis's absence I feel responsible. Tell me that you have recovered, as I have, from the untoward incident due to a stupid cook?"

Gabrielle politely declared herself to be well, deplored the abbé's illness, and intimated with a slight inclination that the interview was over. Chilly, not to say icy. But there was no symptom of suspicion in her clear blue eyes. She declined to say more than was necessary to a man whom she detested, that was all. But Toinon, the abbé was convinced, knew all about it. Why had she kept her knowledge from her mistress? What had she done with the parcel? She had allowed him clearly

to understand, that she was not taken in by his comedy. Did she not always make a parade, to the scandal of the household, of having every article tasted that was to be consumed by her mistress or herself?

He had seen her wrap up the cakes which the dog had not devoured—to what end? It would be well to have those cakes and to destroy them; was it worth the trouble of finding and purloining them? It had been generally admitted that through carelessness there had been an accident which was not followed by a fatal result. In every household such accidents occur since the culinary genius is not infallible. Were the things to be analysed, it might transpire that the quantity of verdigris or subacetate on the copper plate had been excessive, so great as to look like deliberate

purpose. Did Toinon propose to open a judicial inquiry under the presidency of Madame La Maréchale; produce her *pieces de conviction*; accuse a respectable ghostly man of attempted murder? The idea was so ludicrous that Pharamond laughed aloud. Let her do as she liked. Bother the cakes! The inquiry would be very funny. He quite hoped that she would ventilate her suspicions for the amusement of the assembled household, and give him the chance of victory.

It behoved a son of the Church, brought up in a good school, to pay due and ceremonious respect to the mother of their chatelaine. He accordingly indited a sweet note expressive of joyous surprise, and requesting the honour of an interview.

Gabrielle was about to seize the note

and tear it into fragments, but the hand impulsively raised fell by her side, and the words she would have spoken died upon her lips. Why worry the venerable dame with her own peck of troubles? She had gone through such paroxysms of terror on the journey that she was still all of a twitter. "You've not the smallest idea! My pet—" she began in her high treble, "what the villages and towns were like. Where such crowds of forbidding tatterdemalions could have sprung from I cannot understand. And when they saw my coach and armed servants, they pursued us with yells and stones, actually flints! A sharp one nearly struck me in the face. I was so indignant that I felt inclined to stop and say, 'You curs! Do you know I am the widow of one who spilt his best blood for his country and his

king?' but now I am rather glad I did not."

"Dearest mother!" the marquise murmured, clasping the old lady to her bosom, "I am so glad you did not! Alas! even to name our martyr king is to rouse a volley of curses."

And then the old lady, enchanted to have found a listener who would not interrupt her flow, gabbled on interminably about the condition of the capital. Before daring to decide on a journey, she had called in good M. Galland who, contrary to her own views, had considered it an admirable suggestion that the mother should visit the daughter. "If I had known all, wild horses would not have moved me. The threatening attitude of your rustics is more menacing than our mob at home." She failed to add that as she rarely stepped outside the door,

she knew but little of the Paris rabble.

“The abbé—how nice it must be to have him,” she went off at a tangent. “A most engaging man. I remember that when he visited us in Paris I said to your dear father—ah, deary me—he’s with the blessed—that it was a miracle to find such breeding in a provincial. You must excuse me, pet, if I seem rude to your husband’s brother, but he was brought up in the south somewhere, he told me, where they cannot be expected to assume the polish of the capital. Well, well—he must be a very clever and cultivated man as well as a most delightful one !”

How could the marquise divulge what she knew of the abbé to this garrulous and purblind old woman ? Toinon, who hung about the room and knew more than

did her mistress could scarce contain herself. Had it been worth while to summon such a silly harridan? Her contingent of domestics, however, was a safeguard, during whose stay a taster could be dispensed with. Suffice it, she was here, and must be detained as long as possible, though she always detested Lorge. Toinon had made up her mind what steps she intended to take—the very steps which the abbé had guessed. She intended formally to impeach the abbé and Mademoiselle Brunelle; to unveil the past and the present for the shocked old lady's benefit, and solemnly adjure her on her return to the capital, to take steps for her daughter's safety, or make up her mind till her dying day to be persecuted by vengeful ghosts. In face of such an impeachment, and on the production of the



cakes, the guilty abbé would quail. At any rate, his claws would be cut, so far as extreme measures were concerned.

The reception of the brothers by the maréchale was most cordial. The chevalier quite won her heart, for his watery gaze would remain fixed on her for hours, while, knitting in hand, she furbished up for him the legends of the chateau. He was like a wistful eyed, cosy, lapdog—with an ever-wagging tail. If he spoke little, he was an excellent listener, and when she grew weary of chattering, the abbé could talk enough for both. On the whole, much as she disliked the place, she was quite glad to have come, for the house in the suburbs of Paris was deadly dull; there was no society at present, since her old friends were in prison or had emigrated.

It was charming, too, with Gabrielle and the cherubs, to forget the hurly-burly of the Revolution. The perfect peace and majestic repose of the chateau were soothing to the nerves, while there was sufficient liveliness to prevent boredom. There never was so attentive a cavalier as that delightful abbé who seemed to guess everything by intuition. Was she chilly, the devoted soul was sure to come round the corner in answer to a wish, armed with a wrap and an umbrella. For her he selected the choicest pears and apples at breakfast, indited complimentary sonnets—as though she were not silver-haired and wrinkled. As the evenings were drawing in he would improvise games and pastimes to pass the hours in which the children could join, and made himself so agreeable to all that the guest

was enchanted. "Really, pet, it is quite arcadian," the worthy dame would remark to her daughter. "I'd no notion this horrid place could be made so nice. I can imagine myself at Trianon again in the good old days. Ah, well, well, well!" And then with a big sigh she would burst into tears, remembering what had been and what was.

The individual who did not at all appreciate the sudden *volte-face* was, as may be imagined, Mademoiselle Brunelle. Fortune was in an elfish mood. For her mother's sake the marquise had tacitly permitted the brothers to resume the place they had once occupied, promising herself—when the visit was over—to hold them at arms' length again; but with Aglaé it was different. On no pretence could she be permitted to join the circle. Indeed,

it was hinted to her in a politely worded note that she was delaying her departure over long.

The abbé had declared that the marplot must be frightened away, and yet he was sparing no pains to make the visit pleasant. It was evident that he and his brother avoided their ally lest she should fall on them with just upbraiding. If she beheld them in the distance, it was but to see them whisking round a corner. Oblivious of feelings she was left alone to brood and mope ; her meals were served apart as though she were infectious ; and now she had received the curtest of summonses to make herself scarce forthwith. Oh ! how she hated the lot of them !

In truth she was in a dilemma, and did not know what to do. Clovis had been got rid of while something was being done

which might revolt his squeamish nature ; and though he said nothing, she was certain that he had more than a vague suspicion of what was going forward. But supposing that nothing were to take place after all ? Supposing that when he had raised the necessary sum, and called on the others to join him, they were to do so, and cross the frontier, leaving Gabrielle behind ? What he was able to raise could not be very much, and one cannot live in luxury at Geneva or elsewhere on expectations. They would have to report that the marquise was charming well, instead of dead, and that, unmolested, she might live on for years. Why should she not, in their absence, make another will, or a dozen others, whereby even the shadowy expectations would be reduced to thinnest air ?

Was the abbé scheming to gain time? It struck Aglaé with a gush of impotent wrath that perchance the coming of the maréchale had been his own device, arranged so as to tide over the days until mademoiselle should have no excuse for lingering, that he might then have the heiress to himself! Perhaps his recently developed hatred of her was a snare to deceive the governess? If it turned out that this was so, what course would it behove her to pursue? Should she seem to accept her fate, drive quietly away, and joining Clovis, unfold the machinations of his brother? Would Clovis believe, and if he did, how would he act — he who had fullest confidence in his brother? Were the suspicions that racked her justified or not? Meanwhile, she was treated like a

social Pariah, and the precious hours waned.

The abbé guessed her thoughts, and laughed. Women are so nimble witted that when they enter the labyrinth of scheming they frequently wander too far and lose themselves. Pharamond was quite as anxious to be rid of the old lady as the younger one could be, but he was far-seeing and cautious, while his coadjutor was culpably impatient.

It was one night when the family sat at supper in the boudoir that Toinon struck her blow. There had been a splendid bout of blind man's buff in the grand saloon. The cherubs had been seized by Toinon and carried off to bed, flushed, out of breath, and happy. The pursy chevalier, who had been very active, puffed and blew, and looked like to have

a fit. Madame la Maréchale had been frisking after a fashion that surprised herself. The abbé mopped his face with a dainty kerchief, and flung himself at Gabrielle's feet, as in the departed days.

"You are our prisoner, maréchale," he cried gaily—"a prisoner for life in this ancient fortress, and shall never go hence alive. You add such a charm to our circle that we positively can't do without you. Is it not so, dear Gabrielle? Tell our mother that she is here for good."

Pharamond glanced up, with a yellow light glinting through half-closed lids, and lips drawn tightly over teeth: attitude and expression recalled vividly scenes she would gladly have forgotten, and Gabrielle, she knew not why, was frightened.

Toinon, re-entering, marked his fami-



liar gesture and her lady's fear, and her gorge rose till she felt choking. A venomous, slimy snake was coiling itself about the feet of the marquise, fouling her with its tainted breath. The abnormal, loathsome reptile! Was he slowly to enwrap her in his glittering coils and crush her bones, while Toinon stood by, unaiding? Her brain in a whirl of indignation, the abigail blurted out, "For good or evil, which? You dare not poison *her*—that is a comfort—lest her domestics should report the fact."

The suddenness of the attack startled even Pharamond, while the maréchale stared bewildered, and Gabrielle turned a shade more pale. With anxious and surprised inquiry the marquise gazed at her foster-sister. What was this? Full well she knew of what the abbé was capable,

and that her maid would not bring false charges.

The ice broken, Toinon felt better, refreshed as by a douche of water. Leaning against the door, hands firmly planted upon hips, she turned to the amazed maréchale and plainly told her tale. She told of the marquise's symptoms, of her own suspicion but too soon verified; of how she had found Jean's dog stretched dead upon the floor, with a green liquor running from its mouth; how by prompt action she had saved her mistress, who had luckily taken but a mouthful; how she had found the abbé in perfect health some hours after (if his tale were true), he had swallowed a strong dose of poison; how she, Toinon, had then sent for Madame de Brèze, that in the future she might shield her daughter.

Never in her whole life before had the poor old woman been placed in a position of responsibility, and she could only murmur in angry fear—"Why me—why send for me?" Indeed she was a ludicrous example of the broken reed, and the abbé waved airy thanks to Toinon with white fingers, in that she was so kindly playing into his hands.

"Why, indeed," he echoed, "if half were true of what that naughty minx accuses me. I poison our darling Gabrielle! The idea would be intensely comic if it were not offensive. It is a fact, madame, of which Gabrielle is well aware, that an accident occurred, owing to a scullion's carelessness. I myself nearly succumbed, for I had a desperate battle for life, and when I recovered, sent up a hymn of thanks to Heaven in that

Gabrielle should have but suffered slightly."

"You knew so little of your poison that you assumed wrong symptoms!" remarked Toinon, in disdain.

"Not so. It is you who know not the poison," retorted Pharamond, with a malignant flash that was instantly suppressed. "Spite and fatuous ignorance misled you. The symptoms vary according to quantity imbibed. I unluckily ate a cake and half before I was aware of anything peculiar, and any doctor will tell you that whereas a small dose of subacetate of copper will produce coma, a large one will bring about griping pains and tetanic convulsions, which, without aid from above, lead to paralysis and death."

"A large dose acts on the system

quickly — within an hour,” scoffed the abigail. “When I told you that the cakes were poisoned you were in perfect health.”

“I had but just partaken——”

“A clumsy liar! I asked Bertrand if he had more of his confectionery, and he answered with a searching look of suspicious inquiry that all he had made were served to the marquise.”

“Upon my word, the wench is very erudite,” laughed the abbé, lightly. “How come you to know so much?”

“There was an ancient book on poisons in the library. I turned up the article ‘Copper,’ and studied it.”

“Was?”

“Yes, was. The book is hidden now where you will never find it.”

There was a pause, during which the

combatants studied each other warily. Then the abbé, shrugging his shoulders, in disgust drawled out, "Have we not had enough of this low comedy?"

"I ascertained," pursued the undaunted maiden, "that the necessary quantity of verdigris so to affect one little cake out of many as almost to produce coma in one who had taken a single bite must be so large that a copper cooking-plate would have to be thickly buttered with it. Now Bertrand excused himself on the plea that the plate in use was found to be 'not quite clean.' If he had buttered it then was your 'accident' not due to inadvertence."

"What proof have you that the cakes were so heavily loaded?"

"The fact that the dog died within half-an-hour; that I retained two which I

intend presenting to madame that she may have them analysed in Paris."

"A pretty story, ingenious as wicked. No one saw the dog perish but yourself. What evidence is there, except your own, that the cakes in your possession are in the same condition as when placed on the table? Are you sure you have any cakes at all?"

There was such an air of mischievous satisfaction underlying the tone of banter that Toinon's heart stood still. "How are you sure—" she began, then sped swiftly from the room, to return in a few moments white as a sheet and breathless.

"They are gone," she panted, "gone! You discovered where they were concealed, you wicked man, and have destroyed them!"

The abbé rose leisurely from the floor

and broke into a shout of laughter. "Dear ladies," he apologised, "you must forgive so vulgar a display of merriment, but the jest is too, too good. What subtle forms, nowadays, will not the malice of the enemy assume! Unfortunate noblesse! Unjust and cruel age! The inscrutable powers permit us to be hauled to prison, conducted to the shambles, but allow us to leave the world with characters unstained. The mob would trump up charges against us now to justify their deeds; but the charges are so shallow and so foolish that they defeat their ends. Poisoned cakes! Pah! Unhappy girl, you who have received a superior education should have soared above such folly. It was the rumour that spread from Paris about the king and queen and the poisoned food at the Tuileries that put



this absurd notion in your head. Madame de Brèze, I grieve that so untoward an incident as this should have occurred during your stay among us, which we have all striven to make a pleasant one. We have kept it from you, but it is true, to our misfortune, that the spirit of the province is menacing. There is nothing that the peasants will not believe against an aristo. If you sallied forth and announced that I, the Abbé Pharamond, am specially partial to boiled baby, served *aux choux*, there is not one who would not believe you. This girl is betrothed to Jean Boulot, the gamekeeper, who deliberately left a respectable service to make himself notorious at Blois as the most rabid of all the Jacobins, and it is obvious that she acts now under his influence, regardless of long service under

the marquise and of the many benefits received. Alack ! the ingratitude of those who rend the hand that caresses them is very hard to bear."

"Madame, you do not believe him?" cried Toinon, throwing herself at Gabrielle's feet and anxiously searching her face. "You know that the man is lying!"

"Yes, I know," Gabrielle whispered as she bent to kiss her brow. "I know you have spoken truth, but we are powerless."

She leaned back, supporting her head wearily upon her arm, perfectly composed in demeanour, while Toinon, her face buried in her lap, sobbed as if her heart were breaking.

The aged Madame de Brèze turned from one to the other of the group, utterly

mystified, with a growing grudge against some one, at present she could not tell whom. A gulf had suddenly yawned in front, and from its depths arose a faint sickening fume of death. Although she had a foot in the grave she mightily objected to the smell of death. Which of these two spoke truth? The dear delightful abbé could not have—oh, no, that was absurd and ridiculous, and yet why should Gabrielle sit so stonily with that woful look of pain? It was plainly her place to rise up and take his part, exonerate him at once from even the slightest shadow of this dreadful thing; at least to declare her conviction that the abigail was mad, was suffering from some unhealthy fancy. It was not the poor girl's fault. Were not current events a more than sufficient excuse for any amount of hysteria? And yet,

Gabrielle was plainly not of her opinion. There was the accuser nestling her head upon her lap, and the gentle hand was stroking it in caress and not in chiding. Did Gabrielle—could Gabrielle be keeping secrets from her parent? Was it the old story of the unappreciated mentor?

The blessed *maréchal*, who was to be congratulated as out of the turmoil, had established a deplorable precedent in the matter of Madame de Brèze as an oracle. One of the pleasantest points of the present *séjour* was the consideration in which her words were held. Her views and opinions were treasured up, as they should be, like flies in amber. Could it—oh, no, horrid thought, it could not be—that Virginie, *Maréchale de Brèze*, aged, never mind how much, *was deliberately being made a fool of?* Much as she was

disinclined to believe anything so preposterous, it did look extremely like it. The husband away, the brother-in-law was openly accused of attempting to murder his brother's wife, and that lady being present, made no sign except by affectionately caressing the accuser. Madame de Brèze did not like this new complexion of things at all. How she did and always had hated mysteries! Why will people be mysterious? Unless conscious of guilt, there is no cause for crawling in shadow. There could not be anything between Gabrielle and the abbé? Shocking idea! And yet in Paris such things often were. Could there also be something between the abbé and Toinon which rendered the latter jealous? Just like a woman, Madame de Brèze ambled off into the labyrinth of conjecture.

growing each moment more involved in prickly briars, plunging about and tumbling down in pursuit of Will-o'-the-wisp.

When—Toinon's agitation calmed—everybody went to bed, and Gabrielle impressed on her mother's brow the chilly kiss of a statue, the maréchale shivered, and there and then resolved that Lorge was a hateful place fit only for owls and ghouls.





## CHAPTER XXIV.

MADAME DE BRÈZE IS NERVOUS.

THAT night Gabrielle and her foster-sister slept together, or rather lay in the same bed, for Toinon had much to tell and Gabrielle to hear. In the morning, the chatelaine looked much the same as usual, but for the circle of bistre round her eyes, which had grown deeper, giving an air of lassitude.

Virginie, Maréchale de Brèze, never slept a wink ; but groaned and tossed in a fever, mumbling Ave Marias, and when she appeared at déjeuner, the abbé shook

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a reproachful finger at her. "Yellow!" he declared, mournfully, "absolutely and undeniably yellow! How dare you, after all our care, look so jaded, when yesterday you were as blooming as a rose? I know what it is. Try this pear—it absolutely melts in the mouth. No. I won't offer it, for I am afraid it smells of copper. Or is it brimstone? How provoking! I have tucked my hoofs and tail under my chair, but I cannot conceal the brimstone! Look at your lovely daughter. She knows better than to believe *cancans*, and has slept the sleep of the angels. Alas—dearest mother—you have permitted me to call you mother—I shall have to administer a severe and terrible lecture. I told you last night you were our prisoner, but I won't have birds that injure their delightful plumage. If you beat your wings against



the bars I shall open the cage-door, I warn you, and dismiss you into space!"

Turned out into space among the ravening wolves without, or kept in the gilded cage to be slowly done to death? What an alternative! Why could not somebody tell her what to do, instead of leaving her all night stretched upon the rack of her uncertainty? Evidently, unless candidates for an asylum, they must all have some motive for acting in the odd way they did, but what was it? It was so rude and inconsiderate to be plotting, and scheming, and lying, and charging each other with all kinds of horrible offences, under the nose of an innocent stranger, of whom they were making a butt. Madame made up her mind to upbraid Gabrielle severely for her inhuman and unfilial conduct. If there was any

nasty skeleton about, she had no business to summon an aged parent to contemplate it.

Toinon, plunged into a slough of anguish, could only wring her hands and moan. It is not every David who can get the better of Goliath ; and is it not wiser to flee before the great towering monster, instead of hurling our puny stone at him—only to be trodden in a trice under his ponderous splay foot ?

The abigail had got the worst of the encounter, her proofs as well as her accusation were rendered ridiculous, even in her own eyes, although she knew the accusation to be true. She was held up to obloquy as a Jacobin, one of the anarchists steeped to the lips in crime, ready to destroy by false witness the family to which she owed everything.

Next, she would develop into a tricoteuse, sitting under shadow of the guillotine. It was intolerable. Toinon was not meek and lowly as some of her betters were. On the contrary, there ran through her veins a current of pugnacity of which honest Jean had tasted. She was not prepared to sit down like Gabrielle, wearing a crown of thorns and bearing a cross, the while pretending to enjoy them. Certainly not. She was one of those who have no respect for crowns of thorns, and consider crosses irksome wear. But what could she do to unwind her mistress and herself from the present tangle? The maréchale was an imbecile old doll. The abject terror of her mien last night had something about it that was full of pathos. It is pitiful to see so battered and helpless a thing as that in the bubbling whirlpool

of our world. Jean—Jean Boulot was the one rock to which the two women might cling in their danger. Jean must leave his Jacobin clubs and come to them. Would it be well for Toinon herself to proceed to Blois, seek him out, and explain? He would not think her forward and unmaidenly, for she would find words to convince him as she had her mistress. No. The *maréchale* having proved herself to be a broken reed, it would not do to go to Blois, for her mistress would be left with no rampart, however unsatisfactory and weak, between herself and the insidious foe. What if, on her return, she were to find that the deed was accomplished? Jean must be written to, and implored by the past to come to the rescue of two women in grievous peril. And they were in extreme danger; he

would see that for himself when he arrived. Toinon knew it full well. She had read the abbé's eyes last night, and was as much aware as Gabrielle, that for those who stood athwart his path, there was no more mercy within his breast than conscience or religion.

Poor Madame de Brèze! Yellow, forsooth! The more she pondered the more troubled she became. Her wrinkled old face was turning green. Was the abbé a monster or an angel? If only somebody would clear up this point. He made her blood run cold with his facetiousness, for is it not creepy to be openly informed by a person, that he wears a tail and hoofs, and to be more than half assured that it is true? He danced round her fears with elfin gambols, till she felt her frail wits tottering; and then,

grown of a sudden serious, he would relate what he called facts, which only increased her terrors. Why had no one informed her before that Madame de Vaux hardly, and her daughter Angelique, were practically in a state of siege; that various chateaux in the neighbourhood had been demolished, their inhabitants drowned or strangled; that she had not been wrong on her way thither, as to the threatening attitude of the peasantry? Of course, she had been right—was she not always right though people would not believe her? She had been lured hither to this dismal fortalice to perish like a rat in a trap. Danger from without and from within. Goodness gracious! What if that story of the cakes were true? Gabrielle, strangely enough, seemed to consider that it was neither new nor surprising that her

life should be in peril. What should they want to kill her for? Was it something connected with money? All evil springs from that. Then a thrill of horror surged over the selfish heart of the unlucky dame, when she remembered her daughter's will. To her, the old mother, the money was bequeathed—in trust, it is true; but to her. If they wished to compass Gabrielle's death, of course, her own would follow. What a silly will it was. She protested at the time, but had been overruled by M. Galland. It was an absurd thing for a young woman to bequeath a fortune to an old one—worse—it was a cruel and dastardly thing to do, if unscrupulous schemers were after it. Why must they mix up a harmless and venerable and justly respected lady in their plots and squabbles? Madame de

Brèze worked herself up into a white heat of indignation, and set herself to see how she could get out of the trap with promptitude, and such decency as might be.

She propounded her views to Gabrielle, who gravely and calmly acquiesced. "Nothing detains you here, dear mother," she kept repeating, with monotonous persistency, "except your own fancy. I hoped you had taken to our quiet life; but if not, it is better you should go."

"I have so few years left to live, you know," apologetically whimpered the *maréchale*, "that I grudge the time away from entrancing Paris."

When her daughter elected courteously to consider that this was natural, her conscience pricked, and she was annoyed at feeling ashamed. Indeed, the excuse was of the lamest, since the beloved capital



was, at this juncture, a prey to devils whose goddess was Mother Guillotine. In the retirement of her secluded dwelling, however, she could feel comparatively safe. She quite longed for the little house, which she was always complaining of as dismal. At all events, she could nibble a cake there without dread of poison.

“I will stay, of course, if you say you really wish it,” she went on, plaintively, as salve to the inner monitor, “but the air of Touraine never did agree with me any more than with your blessed father; and if I were to be taken ill, I should only be an extra worry.”

A smile flitted over the sad face of the marquise, as she took her mother's hands and kissed them. “My dear,” she said, “I would not have you stay for worlds a

moment longer than you fancy. Go back to Paris, and I will pray Heaven that your journey may be prosperous. I would like you to go at once, because I am sure it is for the best, since you are nervous, and at the same time I would beg of you a favour. Take the children with you, for I should feel happier if they were safe under your care. I will give orders now," she added, rising briskly, "in order that they may be ready by to-morrow."

The old lady ruefully rubbed her nose with her spectacles, being ashamed to speak her thoughts. It occurred to her that if the abbé really was nourishing designs of a nefarious nature, he might endeavour to prevent her from departing. If she proposed to remove the children, there would be extra inducement to inter-

fere, considering the uncomfortable prominence given to all three by that deplorably ill-advised testament. Gabrielle had kept her lips sealed with regard to the second document. Indeed, she was unaccountably and provokingly reticent on most points in her dealings with the maréchale, who resented her silence hotly. She never could be got to talk of her affairs—to give an opinion as to the characters of Pharamond or of Phebus; declined to discuss the absence of her husband, or to explain the presence of the quondam governess, who, from time to time, was meteorically visible, hovering. Under the circumstances, what object would be gained by lingering at Lorge, since all seemed alike agreed to withhold from the sage their confidence? If she were allowed, she would gladly turn her back

on the ill-omened place, and thank her stars when quit of it.

The marquise saved her from the trouble of displaying her own diplomacy by boldly announcing to the abbé that Madame la Maréchale de Brèze would return on the morrow to the capital, and, being lonely there, would borrow, for a period, the society of her grandchildren. The abbé glanced keenly in her face, but could read nothing there. What curious fancy was this? She who so adored the cherubs, had decided on a separation! Why? What motive could underly so unexpected a project? The more the abbé reflected, the less could he fathom it, but after looking at it from every point, he made up his mind that it was some feminine whim which concerned him not. And yet it did in this much. From the

moment that the second will was executed, the children were safe from any machinations of the conspirators. What happened to them was of no importance. If Aglaé chose to be burthened with them, she was welcome so to do, as far as her fellow-schemer was concerned. It would be a convenience, though, to have them out of the way just now. When *it* was over, and the family was comfortably established at Geneva, there would be plenty of time to consider what was to be done with the infants. Perhaps it would be a harmless sop to Clovis to have them with him there, in order that he might make up for the shadiness of his marital past by systematic parental indulgence. There certainly was no possible reason why they should not journey with their grandmother to Paris on a visit, and the heart of the

latter, on finding there was no opposition to the plan, was relieved of a weight as ponderous as a nether millstone.

Long before the hasty preparations were complete, Madame la Maréchale had satisfactorily convinced herself that the abbé's place was among the angelic host. It must be mischievous fudge about those cakes ; a silly tittle-tattle of ignorant servants, to which Gabrielle, mopish and morbid, had given too willing an ear. Far from throwing barriers in the way of an exodus, both brothers were almost too obliging. The chevalier, who was a past master in farriery, examined the horses' shoes with minute care, while his brother superintended the inner economy of the berline. In the boot were books, and a few bottles of the choicest wines and samples of comforting cordials, wherewith

an elderly traveller might be sustained under fatigue. There were pillows and cushions galore, and cunning wraps deftly stowed in corners.

"Our dear mother," he explained, laughingly, "shall carry away with her a favourable impression of Lorge, though she is so ungrateful as to leave us with too evident alacrity. Never mind. It becomes the Church to be forgiving, and, returned to the capital, she will reward us with remembrance in her prayers."

As at last she drove away, with a darling wedged in on either side, like panniers on a donkey, the *maréchale* blamed herself bitterly for her unjust suspicions. How could the man have evil intentions, since he was so ready to speed upon their road those whom, if suspicions were true, it was his direct interest to

keep under control? And if—as was clearly proven—he had evolved no base scheme with regard to the children and their guardian—why should he be scheming to injure Gabrielle? What could he possibly gain by injuring Gabrielle, since, after her death, her possessions would pass at once far out of his reach? It was all preposterous—impossible rather than improbable—and it behoved a wise and experienced lady of mature years to scold an hysterical daughter for nourishing injurious fancies. The nearer she was to Paris, the more jubilant did the old dame become, the more rosy grew her cogitations. It was certainly nice to have the cherubs' society in a shut-up house in the suburbs, whose safety lay in its blankness; but it was improper to be selfish. If there was a vice against which the maré-



chale was fond of tilting, it was selfishness. She loathed and abhorred the disfiguring leprosy. No one should ever say that *she* was selfish. She would keep the little ones for a few months, then pack them home again. In her odd state, it was not quite wise to leave the marquise moping. By and by she would receive them in her arms, delighted with the good that change of scene had done them, grateful for the grandmother's care. As for M. Galland—the estimable and upright, but somewhat square-toed, solicitor, to whose acumen the late *maréchal* had been misguided enough to trust, rather than to the wisdom of his singularly clear-brained wife, she would be able to report most favourably. He had urged, almost compelled, the journey to Touraine, being oppressed by some indefinite apprehension.

Madame la Marquise, he had explained, wrote so seldom and so little, that he began to think there must be some reason for her reticence. Regardless of self, or plaguey pains and aches, the devoted mother had travelled that weary distance, and in late autumn, too, when east winds are so unpleasantly familiar. Martyr to duty and an irrepressibly conscientious solicitor, she had been, and she had come back. The tiresomely apprehensive Galland would be delighted with the assurance that the Marquise de Gange was well ; that the marquis, temporarily absent on business, was likewise well ; that two of the most charming and devotedly attentive men on earth were his half-brothers, on whose backs the wings were already sprouting, that they might join the hierarchy of heaven. As for the cherubs,

she had brought them as specimens of the results of Touraine air. The arms of the darlings were healthily brown, and prematurely developed by boating exercise on the Loire. They were quite bursting with health and spirits, and would very likely be insulted in the streets as aggressive and reproachful examples of country versus town. M. Galland's apprehensions, clearly demonstrated to be of the most idle description, would vanish; he would sleep on his two ears, as the saying hath it; and worry the grandmother no more.

On the evening of her arrival, the solicitor dined with her, anxious for a report as to the doings in Touraine. He hearkened to her wisdom, nor strove to stem the ocean of her prate, which babbled on unceasingly. She was provoked to observe that he was absent, and

that his moody brow remained clouded despite the rosiness of her report. Of course, he did not believe her. Nobody ever had, worse luck for the world in general ; but it was really just a shade too insolent to have sent her all that distance in a ram-shackle old shanderydan, and, the pilgrimage completed, to treat the result of her observations as mere draught whistling through a keyhole. The old lady was so hurt that she was unable to control her vexation. "Of course, I'm a fool," she gurgled. "If I'm so incurably imbecile, why did you not go yourself? These children, I suppose, are no evidence, with their gladsome eyes and ruddy faces !"

M. Galland did not reply at once, for he was thinking.

"It might have been as well, perhaps,

madame, if I had accompanied you," he slowly said at last. "The children, thank goodness! are in perfect health. The marquis, you admit, was absent; his brothers practically in possession. One lady and two gentlemen—a cosy party of three."

"Wrong!" cried the *maréchale* in triumph. "Always the same. You interrupt and jump at conclusions without having the decent civility to hear me out. Some men are insufferably rude."

"How wrong?" enquired the solicitor, anxiously.

"There were two ladies in the house; but the second held so much aloof that I was hardly aware of her presence. That struck me as a little odd, for she was an invited guest—a *Mademoiselle Brunelle*, at one time governess to the little ones."

M. Galland started, and the cloud on his brow deepened.

That woman again! She whom he had himself expelled by the express orders of De Brèze. How had she wormed herself into the house a second time. And she held aloof, too—was not one of the family circle—sure sign that her presence there was contrary to the wish of the marquise.

“Of a certainty,” reflected the solicitor, “I should have done well to go down myself. Strange as it may seem, it looks very much as if the forebodings of madame were to be realized.”

M. Galland muffled himself to the eyes in his roquelaure, and preceded by a trusty servant with a lantern, walked rapidly home, exceedingly disturbed in mind. “If aught happens to her,” he kept mur-

muring, "it will be a cause of acutest self-reproach as long as I live. And yet how could a steady-going old lawyer take a woman's romantic presentiments into account? She declared when she left Paris, that she was going to her death. A fear without solid basis founded upon fancy. And that declaration that she made before the magistrate. Did she see with prophetic vision? I've heard of such cases, but never credited them. Have I unwittingly betrayed my trust? If anything happens, how, in the next world, shall I dare to meet her father? It is strange—extremely strange."

Proceeding to his study, M. Galland took up an open letter, and with gathering frown, perused it carefully for the fourth time. It was a letter from a brother solicitor at Blois, formally enquiring for

information. The Marquis de Gange, the stranger explained, was anxious to emigrate secretly with his family, and to that end desired to raise money. All Touraine knew that the beautiful marquise, his wife, was the money-bag, and it had struck him, the solicitor, as irregular that the marquise should not herself have made the request, if not in person, at least in writing. M. le Marquis had explained her absence by frankly confessing that she knew nothing of his move, she being in so nervous and over-wrought a condition through terror, that it would be dangerous to consult her on the subject. It was solely on her account that he was anxious to leave France in secret and without delay, for she was in so precarious a state of nervous prostration that only in a peaceful land could it be hoped that she would rally. As



security for the sum required—nothing very considerable—the marquis had produced his wife's testament, showing that even if, unfortunately, her health succumbed on the journey, her sorrowing widower would be in condition to repay the loan.

The matter was nothing very extraordinary. In these ticklish times, much stranger requests were being made each day, but it had struck the provincial firm that before complying, it would be only regular and courteous to inform the family solicitor.

“Regular and courteous, indeed!” sighed M. Galland, as he folded and locked away the letter. “It is all too plain. She has been forced, as she feared, to make another will. Her husband is trying to raise money on it. Meanwhile, she is left in the custody of his brothers and that

woman. Is it coercion, or has she changed her mind? I should dearly like to know if there is a cross after the signature. Perhaps she has really changed her mind, and I am an over-anxious old donkey. Her mother declared that she is well and happy, and a mother ought to be a judge. But such a mother! cackling, silly goose. And what could have induced madame to send away the children? If well enough to deceive a mother's eye, the marquis has deliberately lied. There is a mystery that looks mighty black, and must forthwith be fathomed. This raising of funds without her knowledge shall be nipped in the bud at once; and if I turn out to be wrong, I can afford to accept the responsibility. Yes. I will fire a random shot and inform the firm at Blois by special courier that their will is mere waste paper."



## CHAPTER XXV.

### WILL THE SWORD FALL ?

PERCHANCE that well-meaning, but mole-like, person, Madame de Brèze, would have felt less comfortable if she had been aware of her daughter's attitude as the carriage rolled away. She stood at an upper window and strained her eyes, striving to follow the casket which contained her treasures, long after it was out of sight. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, and, turning away at length with a convulsive sob, she murmured, "They at least are safe, thank Heaven for that mercy," and retired to

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weep in her chamber. Toinon, entering soon after, found her mistress lying on her face upon the bed in strong hysterics, with fingers tightly clasped about her neck. Honest Toinon was unable to solve the riddle of such singular behaviour. Her mistress seemed to be under some spell, her power of volition suspended, acting like a marionnette in obedience to invisible wires. If it was such agony to part from her children, why have done so? When she put the question, the answer staggered Toinon. With her head on her foster-sister's breast, her emotion calmed by contact of a loving hand, Gabrielle replied simply, "What greater anguish than to part from dear ones whom you know you will never see again?"

Exhorted to courage and hope, she only sighed and murmured, "Even my

mother has deserted me in my extremity. I look beyond the world and fix my faith in God."

He or she who can bid a genuine farewell to hope is forlorn indeed. If this mental condition was to continue, the conspirators had nought to do but to sit with idle hands and wait. Either their victim would become insane, or fade and die without assistance from them. It is said that the fascinated bird feels neither pain nor fear, but looks forward with complacency to being swallowed. Toinon, being wrought of stronger stuff, had no idea of abandoning hope. She boiled with healthy wrath against the selfish old hag who was gone, and anger was a fillip to her energy. The abigail had laid herself out to be particularly agreeable during the last few days, had permitted a certain lacquey of the

maréchale's sundry liberties, had even kissed him in the dark, and vowed to be his alone. This reprehensible levity served various ends. It kept up her spirits, and was a satisfactory revenge on absent Jean ; passed time agreeably, and made of the man her slave. Having settled to eat humble pie with regard to the recalcitrant Boulot, and condone his enormities, a difficulty arose as to how he was to be communicated with. She knew that since the accusation about the cakes her steps had been dogged, her movements watched ; and were she to openly indite epistles to the Jacobin, they would surely be intercepted by the conspirators. Gracefully grouped together on the stairs after the household were abed, the abigail and her admirer whispered fervid vows, and embraced each other tenderly. She

could not leave her lady's service just at present, she explained, but would seek the earliest opportunity if the swain would promise to be true. She was full of crotchets. Never, no never, would she give her hand without the consent of her dearest brother, who was at Blois. He loved his little sister too well, however, to withhold consent where her heart was entirely given. But his consent must be obtained, and till it came, there must be no further dallying. How was his consent to be speedily obtained? She would indite a little letter to her brother, and, lest there should be delays she would not put her letter in the post. The invaluable missive should be confided to the swain, and money with it, that at the first post-house on the road, when the *maréchale's* party left Lorge, he should transmit it by

the hand of a horseman. Toinon was not above taking a lesson from her mistress and sending a summons to Jean on the sly, as the marquise had to her father. The old lady was gone, and the swain was gone, and naughty Toinon felt not the least compunction for fooling the simple fellow. If some day he were to make inconvenient claims, was not Jean Boulot burly enough to protect her? She had adjured the latter in the most solemn manner to leave all and come at once if he ever felt a spark of love for her or a scintilla of respect for her mistress.

“France has sufficient champions without you,” she concluded; “and you will never regret having been the means of saving two innocent helpless women.”

Though she chose to gibe and be mighty indignant over Jean's defection,



she never felt the smallest doubt that, the political fever past, he would return to his allegiance. She had despatched an urgent summons, and she knew that he would come ; and this being so, she was inclined to be cheerful, keeping a wary eye on the conspirators.

Now it was a grievous thing that her mistress should collapse, commend her soul to Heaven, await the impending stroke with the air of a sacrificial lamb. Resignation is the attribute of slaves unendowed with the holy birthright of freedom. Our natural condition is that of contest, the form of which but varies according to the thickness of the civilized veneer. He who cannot gird his loins for the fray goes to the wall, and he who has gone to the wall is a deserving object for contempt. Toinon could fight, and would,

with teeth and nails if need were, and she was prepared to do battle with the conspirators whilst awaiting the advent of Jean.

It behoved her to show that she was not afraid of them, and she accordingly tripped into the kitchen on the day of the maréchale's departure, and scornfully announced that, considering what wretches they all were, former precautions must be resumed. Madame would take her meals in her apartments. Toinon would carry the plateau with her own hands, and M. Bertrand would be good enough to taste of every dish under her close inspection before confiding it to her care. Vainly that worthy blew himself out and beat his chest, and gesticulated, and talked of honour.

"Pooh!" scoffed the abigail, "you may spare your breath. I choose to take

the precaution, though I have no dread of your attempting to poison us. A dirty cooking-plate may serve as an excuse for once. A second mistake of the sort would go hard with you, for I would have you remember that the *maréchale* and all her servants know the story of the cakes, and a secluded lady is not poisoned twice *by accident!*”

Toinon prattled gaily of these things to the marquise, but could not succeed in raising her spirits. The latter, to please her devoted friend, summoned up a ghostly smile, which resembled moonlight on a tomb.

“Fate is fate,” she sighed. “For some inscrutable reason we are doomed. *Madame de Lamballe* first ; the queen or I, who knows which of us will be the second?”

It is hard work being always cheery when others groan in the doldrums. It is not easy to shake off the grip of fatalism in the society of a fatalist. Toinon, despite her efforts, receiving no encouragement—feeding as it were on her own fuel—in spite of brave resolutions, grew jaded and despondent. Flirtations were not to be thought of with any members of the existing household. Firstly, because the doughty Jean was to be expected at any moment, and untoward consequences might ensue ; secondly, because the young lady knew, for certain, that many of the domestics were creatures of the abbé, if not all of them. There are few feelings less pleasant than a conviction that you are surrounded by spies, that you are always under observation like a struggling insect under a microscope. Common

rough malefactors in gaol suffer more from unsleeping surveillance than would be supposed possible in persons with low-strung nerves.

The weather grew too cold for sitting-out, even if wrapped in furs, and Toinon had much ado to coax her wan mistress to take the air at all, for was not the favourite pleasaunce, called the moat-garden, redolent of distracting memories ; did not each flower-bed recall some prank of the absent ones, each bush re-echo with the laughter, which was to be heard no more at Lorge ? It was even disagreeable to gaze from the balconies of the long saloon, for the Loire flowed on in silent placidity, its bosom no longer ruffled by the eccentric movements of the wherry propelled by infant hands. The wherry swung in the tide, a useless bit of lumber, for no one

dreamed of using it, of unknotting its rusty chain.

Gabrielle sat day by day in a low *causeuse*, intent on some embroidery like a fading Penelope, who works on and weaves, a dull machine, though she has learned that Ulysses is no more. The earth is steady underfoot, the sky above; the soul yet beats against its chain—how long? Some kind of mechanical occupation is imperative to keep overwrought nerves from twanging—to maintain on the lips the bit of silence, and hold back the wailing of despair. When all illusions are gone—every one—when, search as carefully as we will, there is no grain of comfort left to make existence bearable, we long for death in any hideous shape, well knowing that if the Pilgrim came, we should involuntarily shrink from him. Love of life, for

the sake of living, is a phenomenon which orientals do not share with the white races, happily for them ; whether they go or stay is a matter of indifference, from which they may thank their faith, since death means to them but a change of envelope, a single stage upon a journey.

It is not uncommon in the east for men who are cast for execution to sit by the wayside, almost unguarded, awaiting the advent of the executioner, while the ease and cheapness with which a substitute may be bought in China is notorious. By a strange paradox, it is reserved for the disciples of Christ, the Prince of Peace, to live in terror of death. No doubt there are many whose burthens are so disproportionate to their strength that, *coûte que coûte*, they are impelled to shake them off, but students of statistics

are surprised at the small number of sane suicides, slowly and deliberately carried out, compared to those brought about by passion.

Gabrielle knew, or thought she knew, as surely as that night follows day, that the frayed string which held the sword was worn almost through, and that at any moment it might fall.

When on waking she saw Toinon fling back the heavy curtains of a morning to let in the light, she wondered that she should be alive and well. What object did her existence fulfil upon the earth? Why was she spared to crawl on aimlessly? Without husband, without children, without a friend in the world except this simple foster-sister, why did she linger thus? Surely her fitting place was in the fragrant earth, sheltered by



waving grass from carking cares. The string was worn through, and yet it would not break. Day followed day, night followed night, nothing new occurred. She went her dismal way, and no one troubled her or seemed to know or care whether she were alive or dead, or well or dying. Aglaé was still in the chateau, but made no sign. Toinon looked forth in vain for Jean Boulot. He neither wrote nor came; what if the letter had miscarried?

The conspirators were quiescent because they were in a quandary. There was no news of Clovis, or of what he was doing at Blois. His continued silence was incomprehensible. Had any hitch occurred in the negotiations? Surely not, or he would have communicated with his brother. Kept in suspense, the latter knew not what course to adopt, and had

much ado to endure the persistent girding of Aglaé. The ex-governess found the situation quite intolerable, and was for grappling with it at all hazards, and at once. Clovis had made some muddle, which might place the heads of all of them in jeopardy. He was not a man to be despatched on any mission requiring delicacy or tact. What he was pleased to call his feelings (mere pusillanimity) had been too much considered. *It* should have been carried out to the end, if not actually in his presence, at least while he was dwelling in the chateau. What was to prevent him now, supposing that anything went wrong, from declaring that his brothers had acted entirely without his knowledge or consent? It was a grand mistake to have let him fly off alone, and the abbé, who plumed himself so much on

his astuteness, and who was for ever finding fault with others, had been guilty of the biggest blunder of all.

Thus mademoiselle querulously droning with increasing fretfulness, and the wrath of her fellow-conspirator was kindled against her. In his heart he could admit that there had been a grave mistake, but was that a reason for bearing taunts from Aglaé? She had been called in to act as conscience keeper to the marquis, and a pretty way she had carried out the task. Instead of bringing him round to active co-operation, she had only so far blinded him as to procure the tacit consent of convenient temporary absence. It had been a foolish plan, too, to raise money on the will, during the marquise's life. Better far to have announced her sudden and much-to-be-regretted demise,

to have performed decorous obsequies, and then quietly have taken possession. But then Clovis was so untrustworthy. He was just the sort of provoking man to veer round suddenly, to place obstacles instead of adding all his weight to keep the wheel revolving. Then the visit of the Marplot Maréchale had so altered the complexion of affairs, and swallowed precious time. Were the marquise to succumb suddenly, the story of the unlucky cakes might be raked up again, unpleasant questions be asked. The schemers must fall back upon the idea of typhus, and that brought the scheme round in a circle to the original starting point—the providing of necessary funds in specie to tide over a period of months.

The complaints and jeremiads of Aglaé overshot their mark, and so stirred

the ire of the abbé that his active mind went off at a tangent, and his wits began to weave another pattern. Oh! if by some cunning device it were possible to circumvent that odious woman—alone to carry off the prize, leaving her and her weak-kneed admirer to gnash their teeth in vain. How sweet a vengeance—how savoury a triumph! Revolving the matter in a brain quickened to activity by spite, Pharamond made up his mind once more, at the eleventh hour, to attempt to carry the citadel. The mental and physical condition of the marquise was vastly different now from what it was when last he failed to storm the outworks. To mark her listless movements, her hopeless heaviness of gait, was to be assured that the ramparts were crumbling, that the walls were insufficiently manned. The

armour of the warrior was worn into holes, through which it would surely be possible to insert an arrow. At all events it was worth trying, for success would mow down the hopes of Aglaé, and thus punish her presumption and impertinence.

Having decided to try again, the abbé donned his most becoming suit of violet silk with gold embroidered buttonholes, arranged his hair with extreme nicety, and placed a patch close to his favourite dimple. This done, he surveyed himself in the mirror, contemplated with approval the harmonious contour of his leg, and sallied forth satisfied, armed *cap-à-pie* for conquest. Swiftly he sped up the stairs, and meeting Toinon on the landing, well-nigh choked that damsel with indignation by playfully chucking her chin. "It is too bad," he cried, "that so ripe a cherry

should yet hang upon the bough. You must leave this dull house and seek more congenial society. There are sweethearts galore waiting for you beyond the frontier."

"Are you in such a hurry to get rid of me?" gasped Toinon. "Whatever happens to us, my place is beside my mistress."

"Of course it is, you suspicious little fool!" laughed René. "If she travels, you will not wish to be left behind?"

If she travels! What new phase of the complication was this? It was distracting. Whatever it might be she was sure it boded injury to both the foster-sisters.

"Travel, poor soul!" the abigail observed, sourly. "It was a long journey the other day that you strove to send her on!"

Pharamond frowned, then seizing the

buxom figure before him, he pressed upon the lips a kiss. "There!" he said; "that is your punishment for unworthy and unjust suspicions of one who means you well. I promise that the dose shall be repeated twentyfold if you presume to talk such nonsense any more."

Toinon struggled and recoiled, crimson to the roots of her hair, her dark eyes flashing. "How dare you—how dare you!" she panted. "Two helpless women are a fit butt for outrage. I am not so friendless as you think. Jean Boulot shall know of this."

"Oho! Jean Boulot, the terrible Jacobin. Are we to be threatened with that bugbear? You can have but little pride, mistress, to prate of one who toyed with and then deserted you."

Scalding tears welled into the eyes of



Toinon, and rolled in great drops upon her cheeks. Alas ! it was too true. He was an idle bugbear, a stuffed bogey to frighten babes withal. Had she not sacrificed her vanity and besought him to come at once, and he had never deigned to answer ? The abbé might do what he chose, the two women were indeed defenceless.

“ I wish to speak to the marquise upon an urgent matter. Go and say that I await her pleasure,” commanded Pharamond.

Toinon glanced askance at him, and answered shortly, “ She will not see you.”

“ Will she not ? If you will not take a civil message, I will enter her boudoir unannounced.”

What was to prevent him ? Nothing. Reluctantly the abigail obeyed, and while he stood waiting, the abbé considered her

words. "Jean Boulot! Remembered still? If she sent for him it might prove awkward. I must see that they do not communicate."

Toinon earnestly begged for permission to tell the abbé that the marquise refused to see him; but the latter shook her head and smiled her dreary smile. "Go to," she sighed, "if the man wishes me evil how shall I protect myself? If he has aught to say it is better that I should hear it."

The visitor found Gabrielle sitting on a low sofa, and as, unbidden, he sank into the place by her side, a thrill passed along his nerves, for the statuesque composure of her mien was exactly suited to her beauty.

"Dear Gabrielle," he murmured, "you are more beautiful than ever."

"You have intruded here to-day to tell me so?" she inquired, coldly.

"Take care! You burn and freeze at the same time. Such loveliness as yours may account for any rashness."

Alas! how ghastly a mockery had this same beauty been! The fairest woman of her time—her affections withered, her heart broken—deserted, friendless, desolate. At thought of it Gabrielle smiled, and the abbé considered himself encouraged.

"Gabrielle," he said, taking her unwilling hand, "in what I am about to say you must not deem me harsh. It is sometimes for the best to speak quite openly. I am a very forgiving man, as you shall have cause to know. You flouted, scorned, insulted me, and yet, though you deliberately chose my hate,

I have nothing but deep love for you."

Again! The marquise wondered in a hazy way what could be the motive for this comedy.

"Love," she observed, reflecting, quite unruffled. "A strange form of love, is it not, which injures the object that is adored? Wherein lies the difference betwixt such love and the hate you promised?"

"An ardent, hot-headed man may be goaded by desperation to acts that he afterwards deplores in sackcloth and in ashes."

"An odd form of love that kills and crushes!"

"Hear me out quietly, and you will be convinced that I have striven in vain to hate you—that my carefully barbed darts have fallen blunted. Your position here

is desperate. It is, believe me ; and yet, though you are walled about by triple barriers, against which it would be idle to buffet, yet there is a loophole by which you may escape."

Gabrielle turned her deep blue eyes upon the speaker, and raised her brows inquiringly.

"Your case is desperate because all are combined against you ; all are resolved upon your death—all, except me, and why ? Because my love stands between you and them, a saving plank in the approaching hurricane. Your husband and his friend are bent on your destruction. He has left the house until it is accomplished. You are hemmed about with foes. Every servant in this household is suborned. They are men, carefully selected, who know no pity—on whose

shoulders, were they bared, you would see the galleys-brand—men who would one and all look on your death struggle with indifference—as callous as the bravo of romance. I have before told you, and it is more true than ever now, that my love is your only safeguard. I hold the door ajar to Hope. Yield to my suit and grant me the boon I ask, and I swear that the shackles will fall from off your limbs; that your troubles will cease, for you'll be free. Free to depart with me to a distant land where in freshly-flowing happiness, the past shall be as a dream. Sorceress! What is this witchcraft that you exert over me? I love you all the more ardently for the long siege. Be mine the grateful task to rescue you from the clutches of these wretches. Say the word. We will quit France secretly

together, and leave *them* to the fate which they deserve."

In the eagerness of his pleading, the abbé had edged close to Gabrielle. She could feel his hot breath—the beating of his heart against her arm—and she shivered from top to toe, as Toinon outside was shivering, her eyes distended by alarm.

The frayed string was about to snap. The long-expected moment was come. Thank God that suspense was over.

"I thank you for your engaging candour," Gabrielle said in a voice that was clear and steady. "I had learned to know you for a villain, but had not gauged the deeps of your rascality. False to the core. True to nothing but your own devilish passions. A Judas even to your confederates!"

There was so sharp a ring of scorn in the tone in which she spoke—a flash of such unmeasurable contempt in the dark blue eyes—that Pharamond, though he had smarted under the lash before, felt his withers wrung, while Toinon without was torn by fear and admiration. Was he, before whose fascinations many a fair dame had willingly succumbed, so vile a reptile as to warrant the storm of disgust that racked this haughty woman? She loathed him worse than death since, seeing her impending fate with crystalline vision, she cheerfully preferred its chill embrace to his ardent one. And now with eyes flashing and delicately chiselled nostrils distended, and a tinge of rose on either pallid cheek, her beauty had gained once more the animation that it so frequently lacked. She was lovelier at this moment



than he had ever seen her—and in her direful plight she shrank from his touch as though he were hideously diseased. It was written then, that he was never to attain the full measure of revenge for the rebuffs he had endured at her hands? He was not to sully this fair form, suck the orange dry then fling its rind into the gutter? What a pity! How complete the triumph would have been if she, at this eleventh hour could have been persuaded to seek safety with him in flight. He would have carried off for his own use alone the goose that laid golden eggs. How he would have snapped his fingers at Clovis and Aglaé—mean grovelling worms—with their ridiculous testament which was not to be the last! What a refined pleasure it would have been, when sated, and weary of the toy, to break it slowly! He would have

carried the maréchal's heiress to some secure and distant spot, have forced her by famine or other torment to execute yet another will—in his sole favour this time—and then he would have gloated over her suffering and degradation as he compelled her to sink to the lowest depths of female infamy and shame, ere, drop by drop, he squeezed away her life! And it was not to be—actually might never be, this exhilarating programme—he realized that now as he gazed in her proud face, each string of his evil nature tingling. Baffled and disappointed, he must even be content to share with the others, to carry out the plan as previously arranged, to sweep her from the path. Oh, what a grievous pity, for the other arrangement would have been deliciously complete and satisfactory.

There was nothing to be gained by

continuing the interview, since it had fallen to his lot to play the *rôle ridicule*. He rose, therefore, flinging the hand from him which he had so ardently been pressing with a movement of muffled fury.

“On your own head be the consequences,” he growled. “You have spoken your own sentence. Amen!”

“My life,” replied Gabrielle, drearily, “has been fraught with pain and overlong, although I’m not five and twenty! The death you threaten me withal, I will accept with thanks as a release.”

“You shall be released, nor will you have long to wait,” the abbé remarked with a dry laugh. “You, who are alive, may count yourself as dead and buried.” With that he left her to her reflections, banging the door behind him.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

### WILL JEAN BOULOT COME ?

Two persons, from entirely opposite motives, were thinking about Jean Boulot. Toinon, her wits sharpened by eavesdropping, saw plainly that not a moment must be lost if she and her mistress were to be saved. It stood to reason that if the marquise was doomed, so was her foster-sister, in order that the voice of the accuser might be silenced. The daring of the poor harassed lady had been admirable—she had conspicuously shown the moral courage which in extreme peril

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goes with breeding; but it would have been more prudent to have temporised. What use is there in making of oneself a sublime spectacle of defiant virtue if there is no public to applaud? How many malefactors have made "fine exits" sustained by the murmurs of a sympathetic mob, who, if executed in private, would have died screeching? Truth is a nice thing in theory, but the practice of it in our sinful sphere too often leads to complications which would be avoided by appropriate mendacity.

Toinon, much as she adored her mistress, had frequently deplored her blunt and uncompromising truthfulness. Knowing that she had a noose about her neck, which only required a pull from the abbé to tighten to strangulation point, it was vastly foolish to cry out, "Do your

worst." She ought to have pondered and asked for time, have argued and implored, have even shown signs of yielding, have trembled and blushed—have murmured in one breath that she would, yet wouldn't. Where is the man, however cunning, who cannot be hoodwinked by a woman if she seriously sets about the operation? Precious hours might thus have been gained—nay, days, by a skilful display of comedy. Boulot might be even now upon the road, and arrive too late to be of use, owing to the inopportune sublimity of the too artless chatelaine. Having defied the arch-conspirator, he would certainly act promptly. If Jean Boulot was to come to the aid of the two women, it must be at once, or there was no use in his coming at all. The anxious abigail felt that they were in precisely the same harrowing

position as Sister Anne and Fatima. Was there nobody coming? The sand in the glass was dripping all too swiftly. Was there no sound of approaching hoofs, no curl of dust upon the way? Quite idly, in obedience to a whimsical fancy due to restlessness, Toinon put on her hood, resolved to take a stroll upon the road that led to Blois. She would see the cloud of dust and rush towards it, cry out to honest Jean to use his spurs, chide him for his culpable delay.

But Toinon, while deploring the mistakes of her mistress, was unaware that she had herself been guilty of an error. It had been an act of gross imprudence to threaten the abbé with Boulot as she had done when she met him on the landing. It set the abbé thinking of Boulot, whose existence he had well-nigh forgotten.

Though there had been a tiff or an estrangement, the gamekeeper and the abigail were lovers. They had been, and possibly still were, betrothed. It struck the abbé as not at all improbable that Mademoiselle Toinon had written to him anent the cake fiasco, and that her lover might inopportunately arrive to look after her safety. It was most obliging of the young woman to have vouchsafed a hint suggestive of such a contingency, and he would be guilty of gross ingratitude if he failed to act on it forthwith. Hence, when in pursuance of her fancy she moved across the yard to the archway, where of old a portcullis used to hang, she was surprised to perceive that the ponderous entrance gates were closed, and that the key had been removed from the lock. The concierge was leaning against the



stonework smoking pensively, his hands plunged deep into his breeches pockets.

"What does this mean?" cried the abigail, with an imperious frown which served to mask a new-born terror.

"It means that the gates are locked, and will remain so," was the composed answer.

"But I want to go out—I have a mission from madame to one of the cottagers hard by."

"So sorry," returned the concierge, smiling roguishly. "Mademoiselle must remain within—a pretty little bird within a cage. Nay, I but obey my orders. If mademoiselle will deign to discuss the point, yonder is the porter's room. We shall be quite alone and undisturbed, and I will make myself agreeable to mademoiselle."

There was a studied insolence about the man's manner—he had been engaged quite recently — which made Toinon tremble. The fowler's net was closing in; she already fluttered in the toils, but would attempt another struggle to make assurance sure.

“This castle is the property of the Marquise de Gange,” she said, haughtily, “and the lacqueys who dwell therein eat her bread. I have warned you that I am sent by her. Open that door immediately.”

The man puffed slowly at his pipe and gave a long reflective whistle that spoke volumes. “Bread? Ah yes,” he observed, abstractedly. “The bread is excellent, but it is not hers. Such, at least, are my instructions.”

“Impudent brute!” cried Toinon,

stamping her foot. "I will report you instantly to our mistress, and you will be dismissed at once. A pretty pass, indeed! when I, her confidential maid, am to stand by and hear her insulted."

"What is all this about?" demanded a big base voice behind, at sound of which the man put away his pipe and assumed an obsequious attitude.

"It means, Mademoiselle Brunelle," retorted Toinon, trembling with ire, "that Madame la Marquise is reaping the earthly reward of divine forbearance. But you can goad even her too far, as you had cause to know when you were ignominiously expelled from the château."

The dusky face of Aglaé darkened a shade, and her heavy mobile brows lowered over her eyes with menace. She

crossed her arms over her chest and gave vent to a rumbling laugh.

"Circumstances alter cases," she observed, with exasperating composure. "You always did me the honour to dislike me. When I am mistress here, it is you who will be expelled. You are silent? Come—that is better. Go to your room and mind your business, and perhaps no harm will come to you."

"I will send over to Montbazon," returned Toinon, striving hard to conceal her growing terror. "M. de Vaux and the Seigneurie will interfere for madame's protection."

"Do you think so?" inquired Aglaé, with interest. "The de Vaux are nice people, if timid, who were always kind to me. I hardly think they are likely to interfere."

"What have you done?" asked Toinon, her heart sinking within her.

"I had the honour to send a messenger to Montbazon this morning to announce with deep regret that Madame la Marquise de Gange had been seized with a malignant fever."

"You did that?" gasped the abigail. "You know, you wicked woman, that the marquise is in perfect health."

The concierge had withdrawn discreetly out of hearing, and with sturdy legs straddled apart, was softly whistling.

No help was to be hoped for from that quarter, or from any other, apparently. The possibility of a casual visit from the inhabitants of Montbazon had been skillfully prevented. The household was on the side of the conspirators, just as this concierge was, no doubt of it.

What sound was that? A horse's hoofs. Jean Boulot at last! The heart of the abigail gave such a leap that she staggered and would have fallen but for Aglaé's sustaining hand.

The latter had also heard the ominous ring of hoofs, and seizing Toinon roughly, began to push her towards the house.

"Go in, you little fool," she hissed. "Cannot you see that you are a prisoner, and that your treatment depends upon your conduct."

"I will not go," Toinon cried, tussling with all her strength against the iron grip of Aglaé. "It is Jean, by the goodness of Heaven, sent to succour us in time. Jean, Jean," she shouted; "it is I, Toinon. We are alive, but in sorest peril."

The cries of the luckless waiting maid died away in a gurgle. She was rapidly

pushed along by the ex-governess, who hurriedly unwound a scarf and twisted it tight about her mouth. Toinon was fainting and half-stifled when Mademoiselle Brunelle flung her within a door, closed it, and turned the key.

With a supreme effort, Toinon freed herself from the scarf, and rising to her knees, applied an ear to the keyhole. Oh for a sound of the welcome voice of Jean! Would he be deceived by a plausible tale and go as he had come? Surely not. After what she had told him in her letter, the fact of the closed gates would make suspicion certainty. He would demand admittance or depart to rouse the neighbourhood. Perhaps he had heard her outcry before she was gagged. Toinon crouched down in profound thankfulness, and as she prayed

glad tears poured down her face. Till this moment she had not quite realised the imminence of the danger, and now that she fully knew it it was past, for Jean would demand to see his betrothed and the marquise. He was a great man now, and a powerful leader of the dominant party at Blois ; always fearless and honest, not now a man to dally with. Would the conspirators give way at once, confess themselves beaten, sue for mercy? or would he be compelled to rouse the country and storm the grim fortalice as the other day the Bastille had been stormed? And then Toinon wondered what would come of that. Would he climb over the smoking ruins to find the two women murdered? No, no. Toinon's prayers had been answered tardily, but they had been answered. The decree of Heaven



had gone forth, and the wicked were to be discomfited.

Vainly she strained her hearing to catch a sound of the dear voice, dearer, far dearer than she had ever dreamed. She could hear a leaf of the ponderous gate revolve on its rusty hinges, a horseman ride into the courtyard. There was a colloquy in low tones. Heavens! what if she had been mistaken! Yet who could the horseman be but Jean Boulot, the deputy, or some one sent by him? She heard Mademoiselle Brunelle bid some one, in commanding tones, to go in search of the abbé. "Tell him there is important news," she said. "Here is a letter despatched in haste from Blois. M. le Marquis de Gange intends to come home to-morrow."

Not Jean, then? The marquis home

to-morrow! How by his arrival would the position of the prisoners be bettered? Why was he coming home to-morrow? Had something fresh transpired? He was a tacit accessory to the villainous plot of the schemers. He was led in leash, a willing slave, by that wicked man and woman.

No hope! No hope! Heaven had abandoned the victims. Overwhelmed by the quick revulsion from nascent hope to hopelessness, Toinon gave a moan, and sank swooning on the marble floor.





## CHAPTER XXVII.

### THE DECKS ARE CLEARED FOR ACTION.

GABRIELLE maintained her attitude of uncompromising dignity, until the boudoir door clanged to, and, left alone, sank back upon the cushions numbed. The sword had fallen. She had herself severed the last frayed strands. What form would the abbé's vengeance take now that he had wakened to the fact that under no circumstances whatever would she submit herself to his desires? What mattered it, so that the end was swift? The dear ones were safe in distant Paris. No cause

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to fear for them. Their mother had been careful in signing the second will to add the tell-tale cross. On the whole, she was to be congratulated on the approaching change, for her worldly affairs were in order, there was no motive left for lingering. To one placed as she was, death, as she truly said, would be release. Victor and Camille would grow up under the care of grandmamma, secure from the machinations of their father and the crew by which he was surrounded. Her death would be an advantage to them, for the tale of the two wills and the precautionary declaration would become public property, and a barrier be raised under the scrutiny of public opinion, which would protect the dear ones from her husband.

And yet how whimsical the situation

was ! In the course of charitable wanderings among the poor, she had looked with amaze on creatures lying upon their rotten straw with scarce a rag to cover them, who clung to their wretched existence with a pertinacity that was both weird and ludicrous, considering that it was but a step, and such an easy one, into the peaceful grave. Now she herself was within distance of that step, and could look calmly into the chasm, contemplate the precise spot beneath whose crust she was to sleep for ever. But was it for ever ? Ah ! If she only knew. She had long ago learned to smile at the mediæval absurdities, invented by naïve, ignorant churchmen, of flames and pitchforks, and demons with red-hot tongs ; but now that she stood so near to Death, that she could feel the chill rustle of his garments, she

felt herself drawn into the sea of idle and abortive speculation.

Why is it, amusing paradox, that the virtuous—those, that is, who have somehow succeeded, to a creditable extent, in avoiding the rugged but fascinating path of temptation—should be tossed by doubts and shadowy tremors, while those who have wallowed in enormities are snugly complacent as to the end? It is nearly always so. The more hopelessly heinous the crime of the murderer, the more abominably abandoned the criminal, the more glibly will the monster prate of his salvation; the more sure will he be of sleeping on Abraham's bosom. Verily, in the long course of globe-rolling, so much vermin of nauseous kind has tumbled off, vowing, as it fell, that its destiny was the bosom of

Abraham, that that patriarch must by this time somewhat regret the flattering prominence of his position. The sublimely compassionate declaration, "To-day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise," has been so largely and freely rendered into a conviction of immunity from the results of sin by the worst of scoundrels, that a premium is offered to crime. The scarce discoloured soul goes tremulously off, conscious of tiny spots, wondering and fearing as to its reception in its next resting-place, while that one which is black and ulcered, soars aloft singing a seraphic pæan. Brethren, it is easy to cultivate contrition. There is nothing more easy than to repent when there are no more sins to commit. Let us all commit crimes of abnormal horror, that the parson may assure us on the scaf-

fold that purged with hyssop we are clean.

Such reflections as these passed vaguely through the mind of Gabrielle as she strove to nerve herself to endure, with becoming composure, the coming ordeal. She recalled and contemplated her peccadilloes. The various naughtinesses of her brief life swept past in procession as distinct and rapid as the last vision of the drowning man. Her conscience kept whispering that she could have little to fear if God were just, for the small sins of which she could accuse herself must be balanced against her earthly woes. And then she chided herself bitterly for presumption. How dared she to conclude that she was not a terrible sinner, considering that as a chit, her father confessor had imposed fearsome pains and



penalties, as punishment for childish transgressions? She was bad, very bad indeed. Had she not impiously endeavoured once to cut the thread and escape? And now that thread was to be cut for her by an alien hand. Why did she not feel the same eagerness to be away, as on that night, when she leapt out of the wherry?

It always came back to this. The same refrain was singing in her ears. So young, so rich, so beautiful—to be put away, crushed under the heel, like the rat that cumpers the earth. It was hard, very hard, and somehow the joyous careless days of Versailles and Trianon, would glitter up out of the mirage to dazzle and disturb her vision.

Some one knocked and entered with a tray.

“Madame, supper,” the servant said.

Her supper ! Not brought by faithful Toinon ? Why ? Was the episode of the cakes to be repeated ?

“Where is my maid ?” she asked.

“Very ill in bed — delirious,” the servant answered with respect.

“Ill ! Delirious ! What has happened ? I will go to her at once.”

“As madame wishes,” the lacquey replied. “I was to inform madame that Mademoiselle Brunelle has undertaken to cure the invalid, and is with her now.”

Words of enquiry rose and died on Gabrielle’s lips. The servant bowed and retired. Mademoiselle Brunelle closeted with Toinon ? The marquise had endured overmuch, and just now could not cope with that woman.

The baleful Aglaé had taken the faith-

ful waiting-maid in hand, who under her manipulation was ill and delirious? Her last friend was taken away from her. She was alone now, quite, quite alone. They wished her also to become ill and delirious? She glanced at the supper-tray and smiled at the dainties thereon set out. No. She would not perish that way. If only she could see Toinon! To what end? The devoted girl was paying the penalty of faithfulness. If she went now to see her she could do no good; would probably not be allowed to see her at all; would be rudely turned away by that woman, as in old times she had been from the nursery.

But it was hard to bear—oh, hard, very hard to bear; thus to be left without a friend—without a tender hand, the crisis past, lovingly to close her eyes! And yet

how pitifully foolish to be disturbed about such petty details! When the soul is freed, what matters if the glassy eyes whose glory has faded away are closed or not; and if they are, by whom they are closed? What childish folly to care, and yet, as Gabrielle sought her gloomy bed-chamber, she felt more solitary than ever before in her existence. The dingy ancestors peering down from out their dusty frames—they who had long passed the rubicon and knew the secret, if secret there be to know—seemed in the fitful glare of the smouldering fire to laugh and mow at her folly. What a pother over a few years of suffering. The dead only are at peace—the dead only enjoy rest. Oh, blessed dead and fortunate! And here was a storm-tossed mortal on the very threshold of freedom, clinging to and hugg-

ing her chains. Oh, pitiable and laughter-moving spectacle! Poor, silly, straining little shallop on the immeasurable ocean of destiny! Summon thy waning courage, oh, nerve racked atom of humanity, tossed on the waves of time. Courage, shrinking coward, and be thankful that thy corroding gyves will so soon be broken.

The marquise, though faint from lack of food and many emotions, refused to eat. How cruel of Toinon to fall ill at such a time! and yet not so; for it must be the band of wretches who had made her ill. Her mistress would go to bed and forget her misery in sleep. Sleep! With nerves stretched to tightest tension, how could she hope to sleep? Wearily she threw herself upon the bed, dressed as she was, and gnawed the pillow in her travail.

It has been mercifully ordered that the

human organism cannot endure more than a given strain. Either we go mad and forget, or drop exhausted and unconscious. Ere the smouldering logs had whitened to ashes, Gabrielle had forgotten her troubles, plunged in dreamless slumber. Such sleep as this brings no refreshment, though it serves as anodyne—a filter of short-lived oblivion. She must have slept long and heavily, for, waking with leaden lids and throbbing brow, she was aware of a shadowy woman drawing back the window curtains to let in the day.

Toinon had recovered then. That was fortunate.

“Toinon,” she murmured; “thank Heaven, you are well again, my only friend!”

The woman stood at the foot of the bed with crossed arms, slowly wagging a

head shrouded in a silken handkerchief. Her robust figure loomed preternaturally large, her laughter was low and muffled.

"Your only friend," she remarked gaily, "is safe under lock and key."

The marquise sat up and surveyed the intruder with a look of fear, vaguely dreading something that was imminent.

"Mademoiselle Brunelle!" she exclaimed, with a shudder. "You have dared to force your way into my bed-chamber?"

"That have I," returned the ex-governess, affably; "for I have business here. There is a little account to settle."

"An account?"

"Oh! not money. There will be plenty of money by and by, no thanks to generosity of yours. I offered you the hand of friendship and you scorned it—I, who am the stronger, though for a time

you obtained the mastery. You chased me with ignominy from the house—in-sulted and humiliated me by striving to drive me hence a second time. Do you think I am one to forgive? You made my life wretched, treating me as if I were a leper, out of jealousy of your nincompoop husband, as if I ever cared a fig for him! Now my turn has come. Insult for insult shall you have again. Vainly — you craven—will you implore mercy. There shall be none for you. I have made up my mind to take your place. You cumber the earth, you useless bit of trumpery, and this day shall rid us of your presence.”

“I never did you wrong. You know it!” Gabrielle said, slowly. Her own voice seemed strange, deadened by a singing in the ears. “On that score I



stand acquitted." A curious fancy flitted through her brain and faded. In how brief a while might she be standing before another tribunal, to answer for the manner of her life?

Mademoiselle Brunelle was provoked in that the arrows of her spite fell short. The craven did not sue for mercy. By the waxen pallor of her cheeks and lips, and the deep circles round her dark blue eyes, it was evident that the marquise was in mortal terror. Her aspen fingers twitched the bedclothes nervously; but she gave vent to no reproach or outcry.

There was an impatient tapping at the door. Aglaé moved swiftly across the room and opened it.

"You may come in, gentlemen," she said. "Madame la Marquise is fully dressed, prepared to receive company."

The abbé and the chevalier entered, the latter unsteady in his gait, and cowed. His dress was dusty and disordered; his hair and linen rumpled. It was evident that he had spent the night in drinking; for his bloated visage was flushed and inflamed with wine, while his mouth was convulsively contracted. His glassy eyes were red and swollen. Their whites showed yellow and bloodshot, as he turned them with wistful apprehension on his brother.

Gabrielle saw in the abbé a new and altered man. There was about his aspect a steely look of uncompromising determination—a gleam of triumph, as of one who has toiled long, but sees his goal at last—a curl of cruelty about his thin tight lips, that stirred the hair upon her head. If the devil ever peered out of

human windows he was looking down upon her now—so close, so close—looking down on the victim tied and bound, whose sacrifice he was here to consummate.

“Dear Gabrielle!” Pharamond said with a diabolical grin. “How nice of you to be up and dressed, and so save our precious time. See here what we have brought you.”

The chevalier, who bore in one hand a silver chalice, had drawn his sword and ranged himself beside his brother in sullen silence, while Mademoiselle Brunelle remained by the door and turned the key in the lock.

The abbé flourished a pistol, which he playfully pointed at the trembling figure on the bed.

“Did you ever read English history?” he inquired. “No! The education of

great ladies is sadly neglected. Know that there was once a fair creature as beautiful even as you, whose name was Rosamond, and a queen called Eleanor. The queen visited the fair one in her bower, and said. 'Here is a cup and here is a dagger, choose, for your time is come and you must die.' How sensible and to the purpose. See how generous am I, for I offer you three alternatives instead of two. The pistol, the sword, the poison. Make your selection quickly."

"Die!" gasped Gabrielle, pressing her fingers to her burning brow, as she looked at each, turning restlessly from one to the other of the trio, seeking for a gleam of compassion, and finding none. "Wherefore? of what crime have I been guilty? You decree my death, and you inflict it—why?"

"Choose," repeated the abbé with impatience, dropping his tone of banter. "Sodden oaf and fool, give me the chalice," he added, fiercely. "Your palsied hand will drop it."

Indeed the chevalier seemed to be losing the control of his muscles, for he swayed to and fro, as one far gone in liquor. In his agitation his sword-hilt clattered against the metal buttons on his coat, perceiving which the marquise seeming to see a faint ray of hope, turned her pleading face to him in agonized remonstrance.

"Phebus," she murmured, earnestly, "you once said you loved me, and tempted me to sin, and afterwards repented. You are not bad at heart. Your nature is not cruel and inexorable, and I am yet so young! Think of the

memories you are raising now—a nightmare of unavailing remorse. Think before it is too late, of the clinging shirt of fire, which as the years progress will send you raving, and never may be shaken off!”

“Enough, enough! It is settled,” cried the abbé, “choose, or I will make the choice. In this goblet is no copper draught, since it appears you object to copper — a soothing decoction of delicious herbs, that grow beside the river. You are no botanist, I fear, or would have admired the pretty spotted leaf of the *œnanthe crocata*, a useful plant without taste or smell, which possesses the additional advantage, when its work is done, of leaving no trace behind. You are so deplorably slow and undecided that I must choose for you.

The œnanthe, let it be, then, for it will neither stain your flesh nor mar your incomparable skin. You will lie with a peaceful smile, as of a pure unsullied babe who sleeps well and pleasantly, and drift gently on the stream of Lethe. Socrates, of whom, maybe you've heard, once quaffed a delicate tisane made of this self-same plant; and history avers that he enjoyed it very much."

The abbé approached a step nearer, and held forth the goblet. The marquise recoiled, and half-numbed by a wind that seemed to blow from out of her open grave, clasped her hands wildly, crying, "Phebus, save me!"

"You waste your breath," the abbé remarked, sternly. "His power of volition's gone, he is an automaton worked by me. Waste no more time, for we

have much to do to-day. Drink, or he shall use his sword."

Gabrielle, under the scrutiny of six pitiless eyes, took the chalice in her hands and drank.

The abbé—determined this time to do his work effectually—perceiving a sediment left, gathered it carefully in a spoon, and bringing it to the goblet's brim, offered it once more with a courteous smile to the quivering lips of his victim. Then, remembering, he withdrew the spoon, and said, "No! the stalks and fibres can be traced."

The victim lay panting on her pillows. The executioner remarked with a low bow, "We will leave you to make your peace with Heaven," and was preparing to withdraw when the marquise gasped out, "In Heaven's name, do not



destroy my soul. Send for a confessor that I may die as a Christian should."

"You forgot I am a priest," returned the abbé, smiling, "and now, as ever, at your service."

Perceiving that she did not appreciate his merry conceit, for she covered her face with shuddering hands, he motioned to his brother to follow, and bade Aglaé remain with the victim.

"There will be much to see to," he observed, "for those who unfortunately perish of malignant fevers, must be speedily put away. Within an hour there will be delirium and giddiness, followed by coma and death. Keep the patient quiet, and make her comfortable. We will leave for Blois at midday, and meet the marquis on the road." With this he playfully executed another deep reverence,

and dragging the chevalier after him, left the room.

Mademoiselle Brunelle was enchanted that matters should at last have been brought to a satisfactory pass with becoming decorum. No ungentle screaming, no bloodshed ; only a palatable tisane which tasted a little like celery. In a few hours they would intercept the marquis on his ill-judged return, and when he knew that he was a widower, he would be as anxious as they to leave the neighbourhood. Events that seem untoward are often for the best. His sudden change of plans had driven the conspirators to promptitude. The tortuous and shilly-shally abbé had been compelled to action, and he had really acted very well.

She glanced now and then at the figure on the bed, who lay as motionless as if all

were already over, and walked up and down reflecting. What a provoking man the marquis was, who had to be served despite himself. Left alone, unpropped, he had tumbled down, the unstable creature; had repented, and was coming back to whine and to entreat and bite his nails in indecision. Well. No excuse for whining now. The die was cast. In a few days they would have crossed the frontier never to revisit Lorge. The jewels. They must not be left behind, since they were of exceeding value—love gifts from the doting maréchal, who deemed naught too good for his darling. There was a diamond parure somewhere, of purest water, which would become the new marquise amazingly. With greedy hands Aglaé dived into drawers, ferreted in the cabinet of ebony, searched the silver knickknacks

on the toilet table. Where were the jewels kept? Doubtless, in the garderobe on the opposite side of the corridor. Yes. Here was the bunch of keys labelled. Mademoiselle would be a veritable ninny were she to neglect her chance of reaping all that could be reaped. As the prospective wife of Clovis the jewels were her own or soon would be, and with this plaguy revolution going on, to leave France was to be condemned to exile. The property of *émigrés* was confiscated. When it became known that the Marquise de Gange was dead, and the marquise flown, the state would pounce upon the chateau, and take possession of everything within it. It clearly behoved the second wife to rummage in the cupboards of the first. There was no time to lose. Casting one hasty glance at the bed, and perceiving no

change, Mademoiselle hastily left the room in search of treasure.

With fingers still clasped over her eyes Gabrielle lay still, each minute passage in her melancholy life flitting across her brain. She had distinctly heard the brutal fiat of the abbé. Giddiness, delirium, coma, death. Within an hour the symptoms would commence—to last how long? No sign as yet of giddiness. On the contrary, that cold gust from out the grave appeared to have stimulated her mind, quickening its action, magnifying each thought in crystal clearness. It would soon be over. The release for which she had prayed so long and earnestly was close at hand. Her fretted spirit would find peace—she would be freed from the corroding bonds of harsh humanity. Not five and twenty, and the world was

beautiful. Now, that she stood on the threshold, on the point of closing the door which may never be re-opened, Gabrielle found herself filled with a strange longing and regret. She knew not that it was the force of young and healthy life that was bubbling up in protest. Hope would not thus be slain. An overwhelming desire to live arose and possessed her being. An idea that was new and fraught with horror flooded her mind, and she sat up panting. Her children! Why had she not thought of it before? A reason for welcoming death had been that they would be the better protected by her flitting. But was it indeed so? Had not her mother deserted her in a grievous plight through selfish cowardice? Alarmed for herself she had fled with a pretence that all was well. A

fitting guardian for two children, truly. How clear it was—how dreadfully clear! The conspirators would work upon her fears—obtain possession of Victor and Camille. By securing their fortune she had imperilled their lives, for those who could do her to death with such cold barbarity, would stick at nothing when they found themselves foiled by her precautions. She must not die. No, she must live—for their sakes! To stand between them and the fate they had prepared for her. She sprang from the bed, a prey to violent agitation. There was a singing in her ears—her temples throbbed as though they would crack in sunder. She reeled and clung to the curtain. Her throat was parched with thirst. Were these the first symptoms of the fatal draught? No. It was excess of emotion and anxiety that

made her giddy. She would live—live — live — in spite of the executioners, and God would help, for her cause was holy!

She was alone. Mademoiselle Brunelle for some reason had left her post. The marquise stole to the door, turned the key, gently shot the bolt into its socket. Then, grasping her long hair she forced it down her throat, inducing by irritation a violent sickness, which relieved her. But how to effect escape? Some one was already rattling the handle without—the deep voice of Aglaé was shouting in imperious accents, “Open! Let me in!” Despair gave strength and courage. Gabrielle tore open the casement and got out upon the ledge. Below was a stone-paved courtyard; opposite, the outer wall, with the postern that gave on the pleasure. Was



it locked? No matter. She wore the key of the new lock upon a bracelet. No time to think. With an agonized cry to Heaven for succour she leapt, but was held up for a moment by two strong hands, while close to hers was the face of Aglaé, black and convulsed with fury. Made-moiselle, hearing a noise within, had rushed round by the boudoir, whose door the marquise had forgotten in her haste to lock. And now began a fierce and desperate tussle between the women, which, though neither knew it, was of infinite service to the victim, for it kept off drowsiness. Strong as she was, Aglaé could not, cramped and strained, sustain the struggling weight, which escaped from her grasp and fell, while she loudly called for help. The patient was delirious—in madness had flung herself from the

window and broken her bones upon the pavement. No. She rolled over and over, and was up again ; and Aglaé, grinding her teeth, seized one of the sculptured flower-pots of bronze and dashed it down at her. Sure the intended victim must bear a charmed life ! She sped across the courtyard, succeeded in unlocking the postern, and emerged upon the garden moat.

“Well !” muttered Aglaé, with a philosophic headshake, “she is in a trap, for beyond the moat is a wall she cannot pass, and the gates are closed and guarded. It was stupid of me not to wait, and the abbé will be angry. Yet the fault is his, for he distinctly said ‘an hour.’”

Meanwhile, refreshed by the air and movement, the frenzied Gabrielle seemed

to have wings upon her feet, as she clenched her hands and kept repeating with laboured breath, "I will live—live—live." Her mind was preternaturally clear—she could see with prophetic vision, and grapple with contingencies. She saw the wall and knew she could not pass it; guessed that the gates were guarded; but remembering a certain night, which seemed a century ago, when she had wickedly attempted suicide, she made with all speed for the end of the moat, at the spot where it joined the river. The wherry was there, swinging loosely and idly on its chain. She leapt into the boat and loosed the knotted links, and, accustomed to use the oars, impelled it across the river. By this happy thought she gained precious time, could take a short cut to Montbazon, and might yet be saved; for her pursuers,

deprived of the boat, would have to make a circuit of a mile or more in order to reach the bridge. She would be saved—she knew she would be saved—and then there fell on her a cold and sickening fear. Her limbs were trembling. She was growing giddy; her sight was wavering—the sky looked brown and dark. Was she doomed to sink down and perish when escape was all but certain?

She tottered along the path, and groping on for a few steps with outstretched arms like one struck blind, reeled and fell, moaning. The singing in her ears was deafening—like the howling of a hurricane through some dense forest; but through it she all at once heard something—a voice that was once familiar. Raising with an effort her heavy eyelids, she was aware of a man with a horse's

bridle on his arm, who was supporting her and sprinkling water on her face. She was certainly growing blind as well as giddy. The man loomed unnaturally large, and seemed at one instant crushingly close, at another a league away.

Grasping the strands of memory which, crystalline no more, was slipping, slipping, she knitted her brows in a wild effort to remember him.

"As I'm a living sinner, 'tis the marquise," the man said, when he had recovered from his amazement. "Poor soul! In so terrible a plight. Only just in time, it seems."

Jean! Jean Boulot! Gabrielle suddenly remembered, and tightly clutched his hand. "Jean—dear Jean!" she gasped. "Save me! I am poisoned, but

I will not die ; I must not, cannot die. They are in pursuit—will kill us both. Quick—for love of the dear saints—take me at once to Montbazon !”

Jean pursed his lips, and frowned. “How like the wickedness of aristos !” he muttered. “It is time their evil brood was banished from off the world. Poisoned, you say, madame. What was it ?”

“Hemlock,” she answered, faintly ; “but I have got rid of most of it.”

“Hemlock,” Jean echoed ; “the children hereabouts often eat it, and are saved by tea and charcoal. Courage, madame, all will yet be well. One word more. What of Toinon ?”

“She is under lock and key,” returned Gabrielle, “but safe, for in the hue and cry for me, her existence will be forgotten.”

Sturdy Jean Boulot mounted his horse, and supporting the marquise in front of him, made with all speed by the bridle path for Montbazon.

He was as surprised as shocked, and blamed himself unreasoningly. He of all men should know the depth of enormity of which the noblesse were capable, for was he not always making speeches there-  
anent for the behoof of less enlightened lieges? Knowing how bad they were, he had abandoned the post of duty, for it was his duty to protect his love and the heiress of the family whose bread he had eaten from childhood. Why, knowing what she must know, had Toinon so long delayed to write to him? By an unlucky circumstance he had been sent on a mission to Tours. Hence, he had not got her letter till after many days; but, having read it,

had started off forthwith. And Toinon was locked up by those miscreants! Perhaps they had murdered her as they had attempted to murder her mistress. First he must obey madame, and carry her to Montbazon. That was his plain duty. Then he would raise the peasantry, who were ready and trained to arms, and, if need were, storm the chateau. And woe to all of them if Toinon indeed had perished!







## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE BARON IS ENERGETIC.

THE wonder of the timorous inmates of Montbazon knew no bounds when they beheld Bòulot—once gamekeeper, now formidable and obnoxious deputy of Blois—careering into their courtyard with a fainting woman in his arms ; and astonishment was merged in dismay when Madame de Vaux recognizied the Marquise de Gange, who had been stricken down, according to report, by a virulent and malignant malady.

Since, for some time past, the Seig-

neurie by common consent had dwelt in a condition of siege, it was only owing to the lucky circumstance of its being Angelique's fête-day that Jean found the gate unguarded.

Things having quieted down somewhat—though not for long, as the Seigneurie knew too well, for public opinion was ever on the ebb and flow of mischief—it occurred to old De Vaux that this was the propitious moment to go a hunting. It was on the cards that the noble pastime of the chase might be stopped altogether shortly, and so he seized the opportunity to give a little party in his daughter's honour. Was it not unfeeling, then, to the last degree, that a neighbour who was not invited because she was infectious, should choose this precise moment for a morning call? The gentlemen were away, the ladies

were sipping tea, *a l' Anglaise*, and munching biscuits, discussing the while the all-important topic of dress. Of course they would not demean themselves by donning the ridiculous garments of the Republic. The queen, poor martyr, was sitting in sackcloth and ashes while quaffing the cup of bitterness, and it behoved faithful subjects to don mourning. But then money was so dreadfully tight, and nobody had any mourning; and, besides, the truculent and abominable upstarts who ruled the roast might take umbrage at such eccentricity and be disagreeable; and when everyone's tenure of property and even life, was so precarious, it was as well to wear coats that would turn.

This proposition had been put and unanimously carried, and everyone was getting on as nicely as possible, when, all

of a sudden, killjoy, Jean Boulot, dropped from the clouds with his unconscious and fever-stricken burthen.

Too anxious, and too full of contempt for the company to be polite, he strode sternly into the salon, and gently laying the marquise on the sofa, took summary possession of the teapot, while the frightened ladies stared.

“There is charcoal, no doubt, in the kitchen,” he said, quietly, “send for some, please, directly.”

Charcoal? Was the man crazy? Infectious, too, perhaps. How shocking! But it was not politic to offend one of the rising stars. Madame de Vaux rang the bell for charcoal, and waited for an explanation.

Jean ground a piece of it with a poker, on the hearth, and dribbled the powder

into the tea-pot. What devil's broth was he brewing? The man must be very mad. If the gentlemen would only return. Having satisfied himself with regard to the decoction, the deputy, instead of insisting that the baroness should drink it, carefully poured a few drops down the throat of the marquise, and presently she sighed deeply and opened her weary eyes.

"She is saved!" he cried with satisfaction. "Now, ladies, if you can think of anyone except yourselves, complete the work. Ply her with draughts of this, and see that she does not sleep. She has been poisoned by two miscreants; but God has protected the innocent against their villainy."

"Poisoned!" exclaimed Angelique, interested; "we were told it was a fever."

"Villains who murder innocent women can also lie," retorted Jean in scorn.

“This lady, I tell you, after undergoing endless outrage at their hands, which is noted above in detail, has been cruelly poisoned by the two half-brothers of her husband. Providence, in its inscrutable wisdom, has chosen me as the humble instrument of rescue—and also of revenge. As there are stars above us, those wretches shall be terribly punished. I go now to execute their sentence.”

The habit of leading others had made another man of Jean. He spoke simply, but with a stern native dignity that enforced respect. The ladies looked with awe on his tall retreating figure, about which there were none of the petty airs of courtliness, and never for a moment doubted that he spoke the truth.

This poor, pitiful, dishevelled heap of soiled clothing was not infectious. The

Marquise de Gange had been singled out as victim of an appalling tragedy, which, had it been consummated, would have set the whole province aflame with fury. What was he about to do, this formidable deputy? Pray Heaven he would not raise such a tornado about their ears as would bring ruin on an entire class. Given that many of the class had sinned grievously and often, that was no reason for confounding the guiltless with the guilty. The peasantry were so crassly ignorant and so oafishly benighted—so ready in these days to believe the worst—that they might choose to look on old De Vaux as an accomplice of the Lorge people, and wreak vengeance on him and his. It had not been his business to interfere in the private affairs of other persons, and had, moreover, been deliberately misinformed.

His wife, as she turned it all over, grew very much alarmed and gave vent to shrillest jeremiads. What a stroke of ill-luck it was that the baron should have chosen this especial morning to sally forth on a fool's errand, leaving his family to be fooled by fickle Fortune! The baroness felt convinced that there was something dreadful imminent, and there was not a single male upon the premises. Even the tottering old domestics had gone forth to act as *piqueurs*. If the gentlemen would only return and settle what was to be done; but if they met with success in sport they would not be back till night-fall. Meanwhile, it was evident that the orders of the obnoxious Jean must be obeyed, and that the ladies must succour the marquise.

Hark! What was that? Voices in



altercation in the passage, and a screaming of terror-stricken maids.

Hatless, with dress disordered and wild mien, Pharamond and Phebus dashed into the room.

“Where is our darling Gabrielle?” the former cried in agitation, undisguised. “Poor soul! Poor suffering angel! She has gone mad; escaped raging through a window, distraught by the delirium of fever.”

Madame de Vaux was speechless from fright. The abbé whom she had been accustomed to see all smiles and compliments, wore the aspect of some malignant demon, as he eagerly scanned the company. His lips were bloodless, his pale face convulsed, while his brother mechanically followed his lead, like one under influence of Mesmer.

Angelique, who was bending with solicitude over Gabrielle, turned on the pair, no whit afraid. "The Marquise de Gange," she said, "has been committed to our custody, and for the present will remain under our care."

"Not so, not so!" replied the abbé, in vehement haste, "We will bear her home to the chateau. It would be unseemly to permit our sorely-stricken relative to be looked on by the curiosity of strangers. The poor soul raves, suffers from distracting delusions. You can see for yourselves that she is mad."

"Mad or sane," returned Angelique, bluntly, "here the marquise stays until my father and the gentlemen return. She is exhausted and unfit to travel."

Prudence! It would not do to offer too obstinate a resistance. Time must be

gained by parley that the potion might do its work. Resuming with an effort something of his other self, the abbé bowed and bit his lip and scrutinized the patient.

Why, what was this? The victim exhibited none of the symptoms that were to be expected. Yet the poison must have circulated long ago. Surrounded by ministering women, Gabrielle had recovered consciousness, and lay, clinging for protection to Angelique, gazing with dread upon her butcher. Inert and numb, her limbs, half paralysed, were moved with difficulty; but it was plain that the intellect was clear. Ere now, she should have been foaming in frenzy, or, that phase past, be plunged in the stentorous slumber from which she would wake no more.

Intelligence shone from the haggard

eyes of the victim. Had Providence worked a miracle on her behalf? Was she to escape him after all? A vapour as of blood swam before the sight of Pharamond and drenched his brain. With a fierce curse he drew a pistol from his breast. The women shrieked and implored mercy. Angelique, who was nearest to him struck the weapon up and the bullet lodged in the ceiling. In a whirl of frantic unreason he unsheathed his sword, and reckless now of consequences to himself, battled towards the marquise through the group of cowering women. There was that about him which suggested the red-eyed rat at bay that springs at the throat of his tormentor, inflicts what harm he can before he is crushed himself. Pharamond knew he was undone, and cared not, provided he

might hack and slash that tender body which never might be his. The brave Angelique closed with him, and her fingers were cut to the bone in the effort to wrest away the sword. At the sight of her daughter bleeding, her aged mother sent up a scream and attacked the abbé with her nails.

A hubbub in the courtyard—a clatter of many hoofs—a confused babble of voices. The hunters had returned in haste, for a rumour was speeding with swift wings, bearing over the land the fiery cross of vengeance—shouting of a tragedy at Lorge, which concerned the White Chatelaine.

A woman's scream of agony—here at quiet Montbazon! What could have happened. M. de Vaux staggered, and dreading he knew not what, made for

the salon as fast as his old legs would carry him, while a posse of country gentlemen remained on their horses irresolute. But not for long. Two frantic men with hair untied and streaming, and bloody swords in their hands, dashed from the salon window and endeavoured to escape out of the gate. Though it was hopeless to struggle against overwhelming numbers, they fought with clenched teeth the fight of desperation, but speedily found themselves disarmed, tied roughly back to back.

“Grand Dieu ! It must be true then !” exclaimed a booby round-eyed squire, for here was the suave and polished churchman by whose condescensions he had been wont to be flattered, torn by the passions of the beast, soiled with dirt and blood.

The game was up—no doubt of it—but the abbé was not one to bow under adverse fate and play the penitent. How to explain away an onslaught upon women. The situation was awkward, but might even yet be brazened out, if the devil would only help, since, while there is life there is hope.

“She is mad—quite mad—poor suffering soul,” he mechanically murmured; “we came to take her home.”

Danger past, Madame de Vaux did what many a worthy dame has done before. She sank on a seat and fainted, while Angelique rapidly related the tragical details of the last half-hour.

The baron's brow grew cloudy as he listened. A terrible scandal this, such as in more halcyon days would have caused a violent commotion, but which at

a critical moment like the present might start an overwhelming conflagration.

The hunting party had come upon a howling mob armed with such bucolic weapons as were handy, running along the road with incoherent threats. One who lagged behind was stopped, and being questioned, declared that he knew not what had chanced, but stout Jean Boulot was back again and furious, and that was enough for him. Under the circumstances it was prudent to return to Montbazon and resume the state of siege.

M. de Vaux was a gentleman to the backbone, if not endowed with wits, and could in a moment of peril prove as calmly firm and quietly undaunted as the procession of Parisian nobles who were wearing out with steady and unflinching footfall the steps of the guillotine. He



recognized the gravity of his position, but accepted it without a murmur, for it never should be said that the last baron of the house of de Vaux had blenched in face of duty. The Marquis de Gange and his villainous brothers had happily been baulked in an attempted crime—that the absent marquis was less guilty than the rest he was not prepared to believe; and if he, the baron, could help it, they should not escape their punishment.

It was unlucky for him and his that the scene should have been transferred to his own tranquil hearth, for no good would accrue to the inhabitants of Montbazon by the sheltering of unsavoury company. Two of the peccant brothers were here, and here they should remain, *advienne que pourra*, until their unwilling host could hand them to the myrmidons of justice.

If it could be prevented, there should be no lynch law at Montbazon. The miscreants had earned their doom, which, doubtless would be breaking on the wheel; and yet, who could tell what would be the lot of persons who were reckoned amongst the gangrened, and who were guilty of such heinous sin?

The mob would learn ere long the facts of the case, and their fury would not be lessened by the discovery that the one member of the hated class whom they all revered for her goodness had been chosen as the intended victim.

There would be a rush to Lorge, which would be found to be an open and empty cage, and after that there would be a scouring of the country in all directions in search of the dastardly criminals. They would be found here at Montbazon;

there was no help for it, and the lord of Montbazon would loyally do his best to protect them from mob violence. But Montbazon was not a strong fortress like Lorge, which could afford to smile grimly down on a crowd of excited pigmies. The gates must be closed, and if the mob did come he would explain his just intentions, parley with and endeavour to persuade them.

Cheerfully determined to obey orders, the young men of the hunt were closing the gates when a horseman dashed in at a gallop, and the exhausted beast sank panting on the stones. M. de Vaux looked up and sighed, and again commanded that the doors should be closed and locked.

Here was the missing scoundrel, the marquis himself, as agitated as the other

two. Verily the will of Heaven was startlingly clear, for the missing culprit had, of his own free will, delivered himself into the net.

The eyes of Clovis fell on a group in the angle of the courtyard, and, blushing, he hung his head. His brothers, unkempt and bound, none the better for rough usage, tied back to back like common malefactors, while a young seigneur whom all three knew well was mounting guard on them.

"M. de Vaux," he stammered, "things look black, I know, but I implore you not to condemn me in your mind unheard. I swear to you that I did not know of this. I was coming home from an absence due to business, and was as horrified as you could be when I was informed of the terrible story."

“You will all three be broken on the wheel,” was the pithy answer of the baron.

The chevalier, with chin sunk upon his breast, saw and heard nothing; his weak brain was in a daze. But the abbé glanced quickly at the marquis and smiled with profound disdain. He had always felt for his elder brother a contempt so deep that it approached near to loathing. Wordly prudence alone had cloaked his feelings, for he knew him to be of the mean sort that, too feeble for independent action, will, while prating virtue, glibly accept the fruit of another's wickedness, or denounce in case of failure. The aspect of this sorry apologetic craven acted on the abbé's nerves like a dash of refreshing spray. The old gleam glittered for a moment from under half-closed lids.

He shook himself, raised his head proudly, and pointing a finger at Clovis, harshly laughed aloud—

“Remember that, unluckily, we are related,” he sneered; “and spare me this humiliating spectacle. We have all three played our game and lost, and must pay the stakes with resignation.”

“I assure you, Monsieur le Baron, that he lies malignantly,” the hapless Clovis began; but his words died away in confusion, for his flesh quivered under the abbé’s words and scathing looks as under a whip.

“Believe him not,” scoffed Pharamond. “We are guilty of lamentable failure, for which I am honestly ashamed, due in part to the pusillanimity of yonder cur; and failure, as we all know, is the one sin that never may hope for pardon. He knew

perfectly well the intended programme, and having given his tacit consent was despatched on a mission, which he apparently has bungled, that we might not be hampered by his cowardice. We failed, as better and stronger men have failed, and I am sorry for the mistake. It would have been shorter and safer to have made away with him as well as his puling wife. Speak, chevalier—you are a drunken sot, but not a craven—is not this the truth?”

Urged by the sharp elbow of his brother, lustily applied, Phebus raised his head and looked dreamily around; then saying simply “Yes; what you say is truth,” relapsed into stupid reverie.

The abbé was growing lively, for now, thanks to Clovis's ineptitude, he no longer played the ridiculous rôle. The marquis

hoped to whitewash himself by steady lying at the expense of his more brilliant confederate. That should never be. None but a fool would have deemed such a *denouement* possible. But for the advent of the new-comer, Pharamond might have stuck to his guns, and have adroitly wriggled out of the meshes of the law, delightfully pure and unsullied, though for a moment stained by calumny; for though the marquise had for some unaccountable reason recovered, there was nothing but her word for the absurd story of the goblet, sword, and pistol. Even had she died no trace of the herb would have been found. Mademoiselle Brunelle and the servants of the chateau would with one accord have sworn—as they aspired to an edifying end and a cosy seat in Heaven—that madame had suffered from a serious



complaint, accompanied by delirious hallucination. That she was better now was in the nature of things, due partly to tenderest solicitude on the part of her affectionate family, and an additional proof, if any still were wanting, that the story of the poison was a dream. But Clovis, by his own dastardly and execrable meanness, had cut the ground from under the feet of the suspected trio; for the abbé had been goaded for once to forget himself and his own interests in order, with a pretty display of scornful protest, to inflict revenge upon another. In sober truth, the abbé felt outraged in his best feelings by the move of Clovis.

Pharamond had confessed with easy nonchalance to an attempt of superior wickedness, and was rather flattered than otherwise by the silent horror depicted

on the bovine countenances of the Seigneurie. They appeared to gaze, face to face, on the Satanic one, and were abashed by his unexpected propinquity.

It was time the painful scene should end, for nothing could come of it but unworthy recrimination. Two had freely and publicly confessed, the third stood cowering like a beaten hound that dares not even whine. In every curved line of his bent figure there was confession.

The baron observed gravely to the company assembled, "We are responsible, gentlemen, for the guarding of these persons, till they can be safely removed to Blois. For the present, if you please, we will lock them in the dining-hall, as the strongest and safest room."

"By all means," exclaimed the abbé, heartily, "and I hope there will be some-

thing on the board. The good baron was always hospitable. Owing to press of *business*, hem! I had no time for breakfast, and vow I am plaguy hungry."

It was a day of ill-luck and penance for our esteemed churchman, for no single wish of his was to be gratified, even in so small a matter as a meal. The three brothers were pushed with scant ceremony into the one imposing chamber of the chateau, whose walls were tolerably thick and windows placed too high for escape to be possible, and there they were left, gruesomely to contemplate one another, uncomely spectacle enough, for in truth, they looked like boon companions, whose night had been spent in orgies. The abbé was so blythe in the knowledge that his fate was sealed, and that he had in his recklessness given himself as it were with his own foot,

the final kick out of the world, that he overflowed with amiability.

To behold Clovis, the selfish and heartless, the superficially plausible scientific humbug, sobbing like a woman, with tears showering through dirty fingers, was a joy and a triumph, for whatever might befall the abbé though only a half brother with no prospect of ever blossoming into a full-blown marquis, he never, no, never, under any stress whatever, could fall so low as this grovelling male Niobe, who had been privileged by Destiny to wear the glittering thing called coronet. Not that that particular covering was in vogue as a fashionable hat just now, but the absurd era of topsyturvydom, would no doubt be smothered shortly by somebody with an uncompromising will and iron fist, and the saturnalia of plebeian folly be sup-

pressed. Then coronets would rise in the market again, and this gibbering thing would come strutting back from exile—a worm on end—with other emigrants, to enjoy again the sweets of life. He would be free and rich, while his brothers bore the brunt. He would possibly speak now and again with reticence of his unfortunately shady family connections, who had tried to commit murder in his absence, and swear with seraphic gaze fixed upon æther, that he was well quit of such surroundings. Ah! It was a satisfaction to think that a sturdy spoke had been placed in the wheel of the heaven-bound chariot, which had brought it down to earth with a thump, as helpless as a hamstrung horse. If the half-brothers were to bear the burthen of their misdeeds, so should the elder one. He should not escape scot-free. “If,” swore the abbé to

himself, "we are to be broken on the wheel, as de Vaux so genially suggests, the only boon I will crave shall be that Clovis the coward shall suffer first, and that I may be present as eye witness." Such being his somewhat decided views with regard to the head of the family, it was rather odd that he should be so agreeable and frolicsome and, metaphorically, skip around his brother.

After a while, the contemplation of the weeping Clovis and the dazed Phebus became irksome, and there being no signs of prospective breakfast, Pharamond turned his attention to another matter.

"Tell me," he demanded of a sudden, "why did you delay at Blois so long, and what brought you so quickly home?"

"The testament was useless," answered Clovis, sulkily. "While we were yet in

Paris, she saw through your plans and took measures to render them abortive. Such plans! We are undone—I, too—through your presuming and insensate folly.”

“She did!” exclaimed Pharamond, clasping his hands in admiration.

“She solemnly declared that she knew her life to be in peril—that if ever she made another will, it would be under compulsion, and arranged for some private mark to show that this was so. Justice was put on the alert, and I came back in hottest haste to stop your action, but arrived, alas! too late.”

“She did that? the crafty, cunning baby-face!” cried Pharamond.

“I ought to have known,” growled Clovis, with rueful self-reproach, “that reserved baby-faced women are always cunning. But I trusted so much in you

as to allow myself to be persuaded, and now I am undone—undone!”

In spite of his discomfiture, the artistic instinct of the abbé could not but keenly appreciate the still long-suffering woman who had braved and circumvented him. And they had all been stupid enough to look upon her as a foe unworthy of their steel. That they should have done so was due to one of the many errors in judgment of the abominable Aglaé. Well, well—she was a wondrous creature, as well as a beautiful. Gifted with second sight, had she been able to foresee what precise poison he would employ and provide herself with an antidote? Hardly. Therein lay a mystery.

Meanwhile, conjectures fill no stomachs, and nature was beginning to assert herself aggressively. It was brutal of the baron to starve his cage-birds. To play with his



brother, or to snarl and gird at him was mighty well as a pastime, but it grew more than annoying that, after the hints that had been thrown out, the baron should be so disgustingly inhospitable.

By dint of straining and muscular artfulness, the two, who had been unwillingly made one with ropes, managed to escape from their bonds ; and the abbé persuasively arguing through the keyhole, endeavoured to coax the guardian marching without to discuss the question of food. It was barbarous to lock three men in a room and leave them to starve, specially when it had been pointed out that there had been no time that morning to partake of even the lightest refectio*n*. Is not *déjeuner* the most important meal in France—now as in the past ; and is it not deliberately fiendish to place famishing humanity in a

dining-hall without the necessary and expected adjuncts? It had nothing to do with the case that the engrossing *business* which had engrossed the early hours had been to supply a lady with a special breakfast for which she had no appetite. At any rate, she had been provided with a breakfast of a sort, and that she didn't like it was beside the question, for is it not well known that capricious ladies affect to live on butterfly wings and flower nectar—rare victuals that cannot always be supplied—while here were three ravenous men who had gone through much emotion and were proportionately empty, and who would be content—nay, grateful—for a commonplace, vulgar, substantial *paté* and a bottle of sound Burgundy. Thus the sportive *abbé* through the keyhole, whose sallies received no response.

By and by the monotonous tramp in the stone passage ceased ; hasty footsteps hurried away—there were muffled cries and exclamations, followed by—it could be nothing else—a volley of musketry. There was something going forward, then, that was serious. The abbé's humour changed from banter to gloomy wrath, and a sensation came over him akin to that which Gabrielle had experienced in her bedchamber. He would not die—no—he would live ! But how ? He ground his teeth and gnawed his fingers with a baffled sense of degrading helplessness. Here was he, an unappreciated genius, whose wits were as nimble as ever, who was prepared to start off at a tangent on any project which promised to bring grist to his mill, incarcerated in a place intended for festivity, from which

there was no outlet, and in which could be found no crust of bread or glass of water. The windows were inaccessible, the oaken door locked without. But the sentry was withdrawn, which was something; and three men, strong and young, should shame to lie down content to wallow in the mud and groan. Something of a serious and important nature was going on outside, as could be judged by the noise. If the door could be forced in the confusion, the muffled sounds of which were evident to acute ears, what should prevent successful evasion even at this eleventh hour? Clovis was strongly built, the thews and broad shoulders of Phebus had oftentimes been a subject for sport—and there the two sat like waxen effigies, both refusing to be roused. In his exasperation Pharamond seized Phebus

by the shoulders and shook him like a sack, but the latter merely opened his watery eyes for a moment and then blinked them to again like one who has done with daylight. As for Clovis, the gorge of his brother rose, and he exhaled himself in ingenious curses. If there was a hell, to which both were bound, a large item of his punishment would consist in his brother's presence as a neighbour.

Oh! It was too bad—too bad! There was some commotion going on outside—a rush of feet, a shouting, a calling out of names—something or another that occupied the entire attention of the garrison. The three of them, if they would exert united strength, could, with a portion of yonder massive dining-table, easily force the door, since the hubbub outside was sufficient to distract attention from any

noise within. The door forced, they could lose themselves in the crowd. The smiling world would be open. Life—precious life—would commence again. And there the two idiots crouched—the one in a daze, the other drowned in unavailing grief—while the golden moments dripped. At thought of what ought to be, and that which loomed as more likely to obtain, Pharamond was devoured by an access of the old frenzy, which earlier in the day had toppled over reason, and tore in idle impotence at the ponderous table with his delicate white hands till the blood gushed from beneath the nails and his lips were white with foam.



## CHAPTER XXIX.

### NOBLESSE OBLIGE.

THE baron's apprehensions were soon justified. Having placed his prisoners under lock and key, he hastily assembled the gentlemen in a council of war, explaining his fears and difficulties. The peasantry would, of course, be wild with indignation, and, all things considered, there was plenty of excuse for excess. It was as though some one had deliberately flung a lighted fuse into an open barrel of gunpowder. Montbazon could not withstand a serious assault, for it consisted of

an agglomeration of clustering rooms, chiefly built of wood and plaster around a small stone pleasure house in the centre. Of course, there was a courtyard with imposing gates, necessary adjuncts to the dignity of a dwelling that called itself a chateau, but, in sooth, the walls were thin and tottery—more suitable for the support of pear trees *en espalier* than for withstanding an armed attack. Duty must be done, however. The Seigneurie of Touraine would one and all be smirched with the disgrace, if members of their order were handed over without a struggle to the vengeance of bucolic bumpkins. No doubt, no doubt—all the gentlemen agreed, but those who had brought their womenfolk over with them to enjoy this ill-omened fête day were unable to mask their anxiety. The peasantry all over



France had, during the last few years, been guilty of raids upon the chateaux, had pillaged some, burnt others, inflicted outrages on the inhabitants. Was it likely that, though their province had hitherto been quieter than most, the people, justly exasperated by a dreadful crime, would hearken to the voice of reason? It was, of course, right and proper that the marquis and his brethren should be fairly tried and sentenced, but really—at least, so thought one of the assembly—it would be better to abandon them to their fate than risk the safety of the ladies.

His neighbour, who was given to seeing things in an unpleasant light, shook his pate and sighed. “You forget,” he said, “that these mooncalves neither think nor reason. They are buffeted by impulse, led by the nose by

the first comer. Whether we give up the culprits or no, they will want to retaliate on all of us. It is class against class, and has been all along." This was true enough, and gloom descended on the company.

"What they will do," suggested one of the party, "will depend upon the man who is their leader."

There was the case in a nutshell. When the people arrived at Montbazon, the Baron de Vaux must interpellate the leader, and be guided by that person's attitude.

The distance between the two dwellings was so short ; the rustics had spread helter-skelter in so many directions, that the movements of their betters were rapidly ascertained. One party, which had made for Lorge, found the gates wide open, the mansion apparently deserted,

and were about to prosecute the search elsewhere, when Jean Boulot appeared upon the scene, declaring that his love was a prisoner. A further search was made, and lying in her bed they found Toinon, a prey to stony despair. Brave girl as she was, she had given way to despondency, for what could two women do against such a close and small-meshed network of foes—absolutely friendless and forlorn?

But here was Jean at last, faithful and true, at the head of a rabblement. With a cry she fell upon his breast, and sobbed there as if her heart were broken, while he thanked Heaven for her safety.

The servants had one and all decamped with such valuables as were easily carried. There was no sign of Mademoiselle Brunelle. To linger here was wasting time. Somebody had seen

the abbé and the chevalier spurring like maniacs in the direction of Montbazon. "To Montbazon—to Montbazon," was the general shout, and as the crowd moved rapidly thitherward, its numbers were each moment augmented by newcomers armed with scythes and staves, who each had something to tell. The Marquis de Gange had been seen galloping to Montbazon, the baron and many of the Seigneurie also. Montbazon, by will of avenging Providence, had become a vermin trap which was full, and, please Heaven, not one should escape.

Deputy Jean Boulot did not approve of such sentiments. To yell "Ca Ira" in discordant chorus—to gambol in the mazes of a dance which bore some distorted rustic resemblance to the Carmagnole—these were safe and harmless outlets for

feverish activity. But honest Jean had the cause of the people too deeply at heart to allow his adherents to disgrace it. Before reaching Montbazou, therefore, he got on a great stone in the middle of a field, and harangued his little army. He would have no unnecessary violence, he roundly declared. Whatever the conduct of the towns had been, the country parts of Touraine had been conspicuous for decency. Unless his hearers promised to obey, he would shake the dust from off his feet and leave them. The three wretches had been delivered by God into their hands. The sovereign people should do what they chose with the at-present-offending vermin, but the innocent should be protected. The de Vaux family knew nothing of the tragedy, had instantly succoured the suffering marquise, when he, Jean, had placed

her under their protection, and it would be an evil and disgraceful thing if their reward was to be the destruction of their property. The people hearkened and applauded. Brave Jean, honest clear-headed Jean, an honour to the province, and to France! Of course he should be obeyed, provided he did not strive to shelter his late master. "Ca ira, Ca ira! Quick, quick, no more delay." Jean looking round was satisfied, for with Heaven's help, he saw his way to save Montbazou from pillage.

It was with some relief that on mounting by means of a ladder to the top of the gateway, and surveying the vast seething sea of heads below, and the forest of glinting scythes, the baron beheld a man come forward whom he had personally known for years. He had disliked the

man, and somewhat dreaded him for his treasonable preachings to the rustics. "A dangerous firebrand," he had always declared, "who will do a deal of mischief;" but as the sanguinary chronicle of history unrolled itself, marked with many smears, he had been compelled to admit that the whilom gamekeeper in authority at Blois had shown both discretion and forbearance. A Collot d'Herbois or a Marat might have headed this vast concourse. There was hope in the fact that the presiding chief was one who could listen to reason.

"I am sorry to see you, Jean Boulot," the baron began, curtly, "at the head of a menacing throng. Are you here as a patron of grave-diggers?"

"You know what we are here for, and what we justly demand," returned Boulot, as shortly.

The sturdy knave! A queer dignity sat upon him like that which is worn by a successful general who has risen from the ranks.

"Demand! H'm!" echoed the baron. "A strange word as addressed by you to me."

"Citizen! You are foolishly playing with the lives of all within your walls," Jean said, earnestly. "Do you think to terrify us by striking an attitude draped in the ragged frippery of your rank? A word from me, and a thousand scythes will cut your baron's robe to ribbons. Look around. The news is still spreading. The indignant people are rushing hitherward. If in your folly you delay too long, they may pass beyond control."

"Do you war with your thousand



scythes against a bevy of innocent women?"

"No. We protect them when we can against the wickedness of the Touraine nobility."

The baron bit his lip. He was not gaining ground.

"Speak plainly. Tell me what you want."

"I demand the instant delivery to me of the three miscreants you are harbouring."

Some of the gentlemen who had crowded up the ladder to hear the colloquy began to shift uneasily and murmur. "The man is right," one whispered—"far more sensible than I expected."

But the baron had no intention of giving way—of bending before a rustic.

"You ask what I cannot grant," he

replied, haughtily. "I cannot deliver nobles to the canaille."

The clustering throng that pressed about Boulot were losing patience. "These aristos are infatuated," one yelled, with threatening fist. "You are wasting breath, Boulot. The vile insects must be crushed wholesale."

"Have a care!" Jean cried, in warning. "If innocent blood is spilled, Baron de Vaux, the crime will be on your head. Insolent vaunting words fall back on those who launch them. We are honest men, and——"

"Are you?" scoffed the baron. "You said just now that you protected women. You prate now of innocent blood; the blood of our ladies is destined, I presume, to join that of the Princesse de Lamballe and the rest?"

"I did not think that even the Seigneurie would seek to shelter behind petticoats!" cried Jean, with rising choler.

"Impudent varlet!" cried the baron, losing temper. "I would fain shield a bevy of women from massacre. Does the canaille decree their slaughter?"

Toinon had kept close to Jean, at whom she gazed with gladsome eyes, and a hectic spot of excitement upon either cheek.

"If you love me, Jean," she whispered, "let the women pass. Our chatelaine, remember, is among them."

Boulot reflected for a moment, and the advice seemed good. "I made a demand just now," he said, "which I see that those behind you consider just, and you treat me and this assembly with insult. Learn that the canaille can teach such as

you a salutary lesson in behaviour. That the lives of many ladies are at stake gives us an immense advantage, but more generous than you we are prepared to waive it. Bring forth your women folk. Under my own charge they shall be conducted to a place of safety, the chateau of Lorge hard by. After that I will return, and man to man, repeat my just demand. If you then persist in refusing it, I shall wash my hands of the results."

An important point was gained, and there was a movement of relief among the gentlemen. But stiff-necked old De Vaux could not bring himself civilly to accept a boon from what he considered the low scum.

"I rejoice," he said, gruffly, "that you should save yourself from the stigma of slaying women. We take your word that

your mob will remain without and that the ladies shall pass unharmed. But I suppose you are not such a fool as to expect that I shall give up the marquis and his brothers ? ”

“ This man who stands beside me, alas, is right,” Jean replied, sternly. “ Your vulture class is infatuated and doomed to ruin, and calls down its own destruction. The besotted arrogant nobles must indeed be crushed—trodden down wholesale.”

“ Sir, you forget yourself,” stiffly remarked the baron.

“ A last warning ! You are playing with both property and life.”

“ Advice from you ? Merci ! A peasant Jack in office ! ”

“ I would save you if I could, but you are as vapouring and saucy as the rest.”

The gentlemen within disapproved highly of the conduct of old De Vaux. What he deemed heroic—worthy of a Bayard or a Condé—they considered stupid and imprudent. What was to be gained by angering this man with so vast a concourse at his back? Some of the country squires, audibly expostulating, pulled at his legs and coat tails, to end a foolish colloquy.

The baron, therefore, brought his ill-timed taunts to an undignified conclusion, and declared that if the mob would make a way the ladies were ready to come forth.

Boulot removed his hat and bowed, and the baron, not to be outdone in the outward forms of courtesy, removed his own with a flourish and performed a low obeisance.

Meanwhile those at the back of the

far-spreading throng who, unable to hear, considered that there was too much parleying, waxed savage. Was an hour to be wasted over a simple negociation which should not occupy six minutes? The deputy from Blois was being cozened, was not displaying sufficient firmness, was reprehensively lacking in decision. The women backed up the men, and, convinced by their own cackle, were garrulous. They were unanimous as to storming the place, displaying to the world by a signal example that the people were the real masters whose will was to be obeyed. Then there was a sway, and a scuffle, and a hubbub, as those in front were pushed back as those behind, and the wooden gates revolved upon their hinges. The miscreants at last! Ah! Now for it! Every hand was eager to take part in the

coming vengeance—the trio should be torn into such tiny shreds that they should seem to have vanished into air. There was a forward rush which recoiled upon itself. Those who pushed behind could not comprehend what was passing. Some twenty trembling women of the superior class, judging by their flaunting garments, were being marshalled two and two, and Jean Boulot at their head on horseback was exhorting the people to make way. A long, low, growl of angry disappointment swept like a wind over the concourse, which might have swelled into a menacing roar, followed by the mischief of a hurricane, if a diversion had not been caused by the forlorn appearance of the White Chatelaine of Lorge, moving with obvious effort supported by her faithful foster-sister. How changed she was—



how sadly wrecked her beauty. Her big long-lashed blue eyes wore the startled look of one who has seen a horror—the pupils were prominent and fixed—her motion was that of an old old woman partly paralysed. Her haggard features bore an eloquent impress of what she had undergone, and there was a pathos in her wandering groping movement that drew sobs from many a breast.

“There she is—there she is,” passed from one to another in an awe-stricken whisper. “God bless her, poor martyr! The kindest, noblest woman in all the country round!”

Some, remembering kindly acts, stooped to kiss her robe as she tottered by—a mother whose dying infant she had saved by timely help—a wife whose husband she had tended.

It was well that Jean headed the cortège, exerting all his wit and his authority to force a safe passage for the timid cohort. There was a rough fellow with a cart of firewood, who, from his eminence, contemplated the spectacle, broadly grinning. He and his cart Jean requisitioned, and packed the more weakly in it, for it occurred to him that the progress to Lorge would be far from rapid, and that he was leaving a dangerous element behind.

What an odd scene the open space in front of Montbazon presented when Jean and his cortège were out of sight.

Being fairly pulled down from his heroic eminence by disapproving hands, De Vaux had mopped his brow, though the weather was chilly, observing, "For a peasant, he's remarkably advanced. If

all were so reasonable—but no—that is ridiculous.”

The ladies gone, their husbands and brothers asked their host what he proposed to do. Sentiment was sentiment, and all that, and duty, doubtless, was duty; but then there are a variety of ways of reading duty, which is not to be confounded with Quixotism.

Stout-souled De Vaux, who, in his excitement, felt quite young—wholly oblivious of a sciatic nerve—declared doggedly that he would not give up the miscreants. That peasant fellow was so amenable to argument on the part of a superior, that, on his return, he, the superior, would condescend to illuminate the situation. He would affably deign to explain that he could not for a moment pretend to approve of the trio. The point of their

dreadful wickedness was conceded. But he, De Vaux, could not, and would not, hand them over to lynch law, and it was, without a shadow of doubt, the duty of the Deputy of Blois to assist him in upholding the law. He, Jean Boulot, being so amenable to sensible argument, would at once fall in with his views. As he had escorted the ladies to Lorge, so would he succeed in piloting the baron and his prisoners to Blois, where, with decorum and order, the latter would be delivered to the authorities, that Justice might fulfil her office. To the baron it was as clear as ditchwater, and he was as steadfast as obstinacy could make him, ignoring the remark of a seigneur that this particularly enlightened peasant had made it a *sine quâ non* that the culprits should be handed to *him*.

“Oh, pooh! pooh!” laughed De Vaux, quite enchanted with the success of his diplomacy. “When I insisted that the women should go out, he gave way at once, and will again.”

It did not occur to him that the idea was Toinon's, and that Jean had given way to her.

“It may be necessary,” went on the baron, “to make a show of force—to make it understood, I mean, that we are not to be terrorised by that useful implement, the scythe. You will please load your fowling-pieces, gentlemen, and we will let them understand that we have gunpowder.”

And so it came about that when the doors opened for the ladies' exodus, a glint was seen of muskets which fairly exasperated the crowd. If muskets, why not concealed cannon? The firebrands who

had stood near to him during the colloquy, were dissatisfied by Jean's moderate tone and perfect temper. He had said a harsh thing or two, certainly; but should not have allowed that pouter-pigeon fool to suppose that he had made a score. The latter had retired in somewhat undignified fashion, pulled by leg and coat; but his feathers were all out notwithstanding, and he assumed the airs of a cock that was master of his dunghill. Now this was manifestly absurd. The mob had but to raise its myriad horny hands, and over would go the dunghill burying the cock. Why that display of firearms? The baron had without a doubt got the better of honest Jean; he had cheated him and achieved thereby an invaluable period of delay, during which his domestics were probably throwing up earthworks; do-

ing something nefarious to baulk the sovereign people.

If this was the feeling in the front how much more did it dominate the rear. Jean's strong personality withdrawn—the White Chatelaine's piteous figure gone—those who had wept tears became the most frantic for vengeance.

The females became *mœnads*, and loudly taunted the males. Reports filtered from the front with the usual distortion, to the effect that the garrison had gained time by shrewd diplomacy, for running up works of defence ; that Jean on his return would be laughed at ; that the wily baron would snap his fingers in his face. A rumour even rose, nobody knew how, that there was a secret subway leading somewhere, and that the miscreants were at this very moment effecting an escape, laughing

in their sleeves at the pursuers. And the sovereign people was to remain inactive to be fooled before all Europe? How the fugitive *émigrés* would laugh when the three ruffians joined them, and explained their clever ruse!

“Jean Boulot is too straight and upright,” some one declared “to deal with such slippery cattle. When he returns anon, let him find the work accomplished. If he does not approve, he can say with truth, that he had nothing to do with the matter ; but, if I mistake not, right sorry will he be to be deprived of his share of vengeance.”

A squire was unlucky enough at this juncture to crawl up to the ladder-top, drawn thither by idle curiosity, and to miss his footing there. The fowling-piece in his hand struck the coping of the gateway and went off. A yell as of two thousand



maniacs pealed heavenward. "They have fired on the sovereign people," rose in a mighty shout; and with one accord the sea that had been lashing quietly towered in a huge wave, encompassed the chateau and overwhelmed it. It was one of those sudden things which, like the phenomena of earth, strangles the breath and leaves men palsied. When the ground rocks and yawns in fissures, and the mountains tumble and the forests fall in heaps, lookers on can only marvel. The luckless denizens of Montbazou had scarcely time for that. The gun discharged by accident acted as a signal. For an instant the gates groaned and rattled under a rain of missiles. The walls were black with human atoms who swarmed and buzzed like flies, coming on and on in myriads. The seigneurs huddled mechanically to-

gether in a small knot, and fired one futile volley ere they were trodden under foot. A young fellow, bleeding from a deep gash inflicted by a scythe, leaned for support against an angle, and in answer to a question as to the brothers' whereabouts, pointed in the direction of the dining-hall. Ere his life-blood ebbed away, he saw with dimmed sight three wavering figures tossed hither and thither, like corks upon a boiling stream—was aware of a whirl of feet ascending a winding stair, amid yells of "*à la lanterne*,"—of three writhing human creatures dangling at the ends of ropes.

Jean Boulot, hieing back from Lorge, was alarmed by a strange light and a curious sound of menace like the distant shouting of vast crowds. When he reached the open, from whence the chateau was visible,

he pulled his horse up sharply. The concourse he had left so quiescent, were dancing like fiends around a mighty bonfire. Montbazou was aflame from end to end. Its wooden tenements had caught, and blazed like touchwood. As he gazed tranquilly upon the lurid spectacle, the ropes that held three black masses swinging aloft in space were licked by forked flames and parted, and the figures dropped into the furnace that seethed white hot below.

“God’s will be done !” Jean muttered.  
“They have well merited their fate.”

Winter and spring went by. The king was dead ; the queen lingered yet in the Conciergerie. Jocund summer-time had come round again, and a quiet group clad in deep mourning enjoyed the balmy

air in the secluded moat-garden of Lorge.

A tall lady on whose still beautiful face were ploughed hard lines of suffering, was contemplating with a subdued smile of settled sadness, the romps of two children on the green.

“Angelique!” she called in mild reproof, “you must not let them tire you;” whereupon an old lady sitting close at hand leaning on an ebony crutch said, “Let be. It does me good to hear Angelique laugh again after that awful day.”

“Hush!” replied Madame de Gange, “you must not brood over that misfortune. The baron died as a French noble should, in doing what he believed to be his duty. Montbazon is rising from its ashes, a much more commodious dwelling.”

“Thanks to your liberality,” sighed

Madame de Vaux, "but I can never endure to live in it."

"Nor shall you," returned Gabrielle, quickly. "We settled long ago that you and Angelique were to make your home with me."

There was a silence, while the ladies reviewed the past, which had been so terrible a nightmare to both. Then Madame de Vaux, drying her eyes, observed, "How strange it is that the baleful woman was never after heard of."

"Nor my jewel-case," replied Gabrielle, slyly. "I doubt if those stolen gems will bring good fortune to the thief!"

THE END.

## ERRATA.

### VOL. I.

p. 221, line 13, *for* Gluck *read* Glück.

### VOL. II.

p. 126, line 20, *for* *etat* *read* *état*.

p. 129, „ 2, „ martyrdom „ martyrdom.

p. 191, „ 11, „ inuendoes „ innuendoes.

### VOL. III.

p. 97, line 1, *for* reprehensively *read* reprehensibly.

p. 254, „ 17, „ stentorous „ stertorous.

p. 264, „ 11, „ Wordly „ Worldly.

„ „ 16, *after* “denounce” *insert* “him.”

p. 287, „ 16, *for* Ca Ira *read* Ça Ira.

p. 289, „ 9, „ „ „ „

p. 305, „ 20, *after* “earthworks” *insert* “or.”

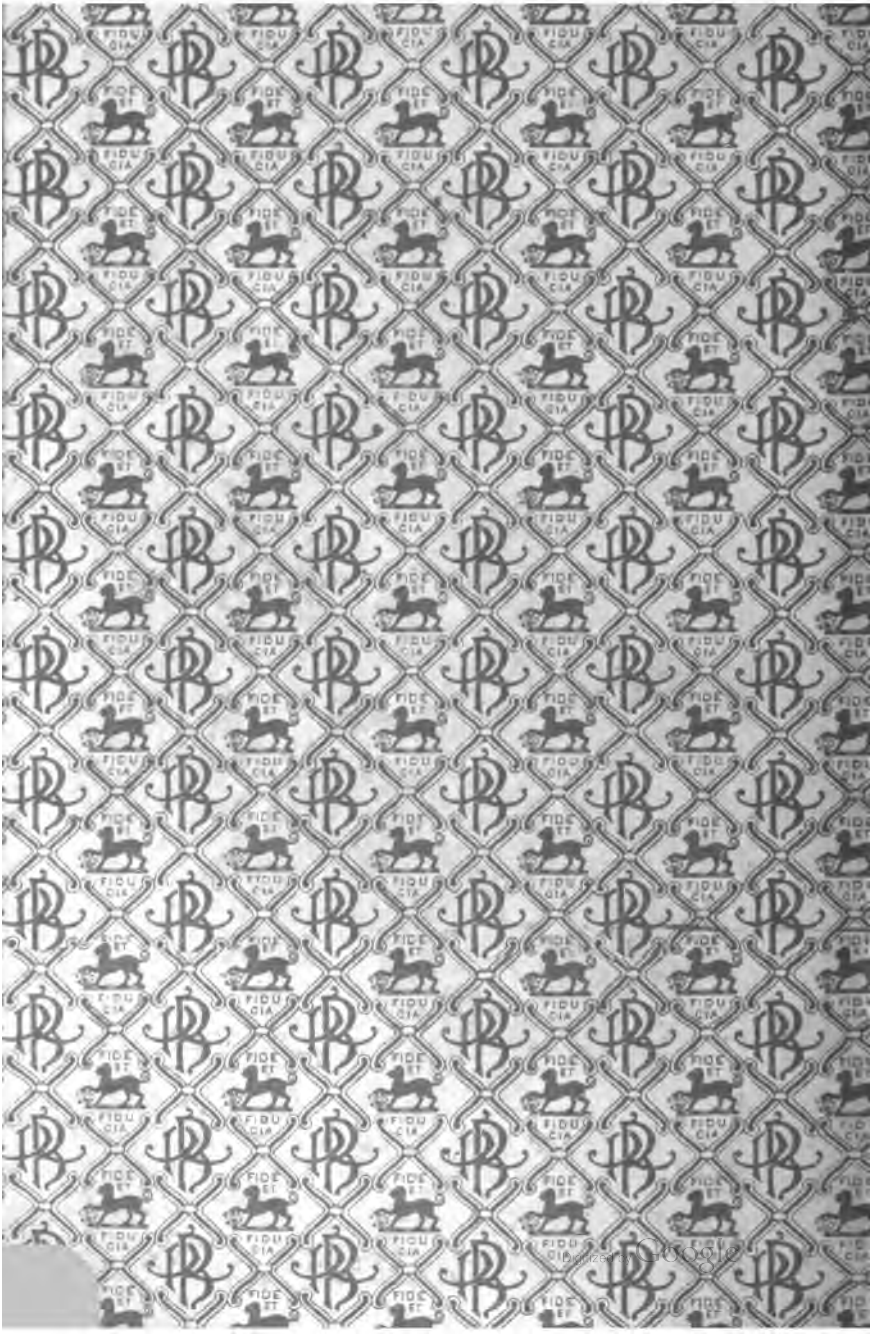
*The Maid of Honour.*]

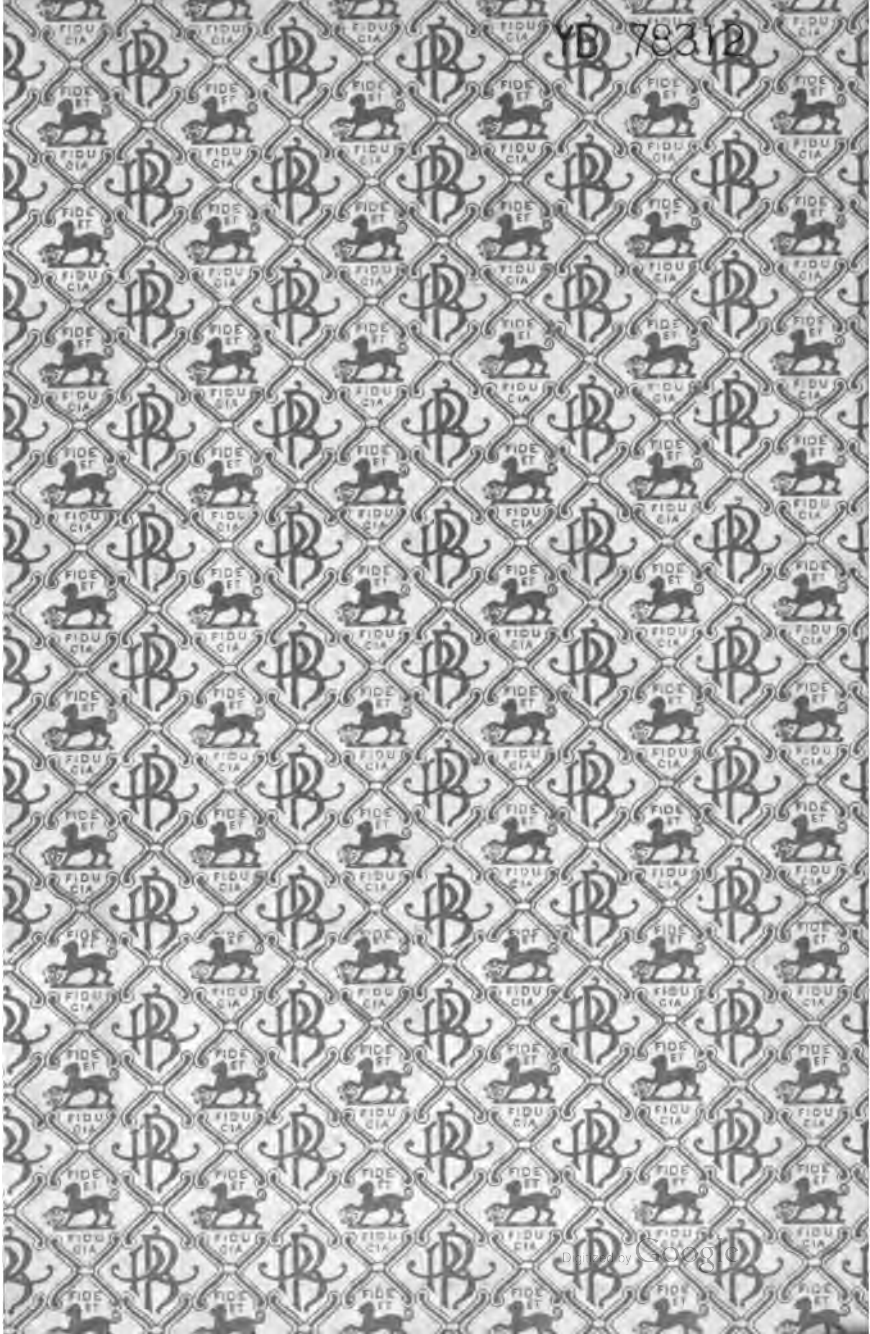
[*At end of* VOL. III.











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